

ARCHIVES OF FAILURE: MISSING BODIES AND THE PRACTICE OF RECOVERY

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## ARCHIVES OF FAILURE: MISSING BODIES AND THE PRACTICE OF RECOVERY

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In *Archives of Failure*, I compare transnational literary and cultural responses to missing bodies in the United States, Mexico, and Central America through careful readings of novels, digital poetry, museums, and performance art. In the first two chapters of my dissertation, I examine literature that engages with forced disappearances in Central America during the late twentieth century civil wars. I pay particular attention to two interrelated concepts that frame encounters with missing bodies: failure and recovery. On the one hand, I argue that Eurocentric understandings of failure, as articulated by legal discourses and capitalist notions of progress, pathologize Central America as region over determined by social and political incompetence necessitating Western intervention. Drawing on Anibal Quijano's theoretical term, "coloniality of power," I further claim that the discursive relationship between failure and recovery naturalizes the imperial drive of U.S. Empire expansion because the Third World is narrated as a space of negation that is always already threatening the development of democratic principles. On the other hand, Latino/a/x exile and diasporic literatures can shift this rhetoric of Empire by articulating a failure that exposes the enabling violence of Western intervention. Recovery is not the project of nation-states, but rather a set of practices that express a relationship to historical breaks, missing bodies, and archival silences in an effort to rescript narratives of belonging rather than envision a path to reform.

In the last two chapters, I consider literary and visual culture that engages with missing migrants traversing two borderlands: Mexico's Southern border and the U.S./Mexico desert. As borderland sex work flourishes in Mexico's Southern border, gendered violence is produced by state policies that deprive displaced people of their legal rights and instantiate a politics of valuation that generates psychological abuse and manipulation. Thus, I argue that Regina Galindo's performance art, and Claudia Hernandez's collection of short stories, *De fronteras*, denormalize state violence by staging a spectacle of death, mourning, and abjection as collective experiences. Conversely, my analysis of digital civil disobedience as enacted by the Electronic Disturbance Theatre maps a decolonial practice of relationality. Using GPS technology, the collective repurposed a cell phone in 2007 that poeticized the Sonoran desert landscape in order to lead lost migrants to water caches. The intention was to deploy an "aesthetics of sustenance" that transform the status of migrants from opaque bodies devoid of legal personhood to translucent figures. If the purpose of recovery is to enact a return to normative states of being or belonging, and if the historical violence of border crossing and forced migrations precludes such promises of return, the Transborder Immigrant Tool remaps the lost migrant and his/her personhood unto a landscape of possibility.



For those who are missing because they've demanded, imagined, and searched for a better world:  
We remember you.

Para aquellos que están desaparecido porque han exigido, imaginado y buscado un mundo mejor:  
Te recordamos.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Archives of Failure* emerged out of a very sincere question I asked Professor Alicia Schmidt-Camacho in 2012 after she gave a talk at Cornell: what happens when someone disappears? In attempting to answer such an important question, I began a research journey that was at times emotionally taxing, but always felt urgent and necessary. My research moved me beyond the confines of a library, introducing me to people who have suffered the consequences of violence but still search with unwavering hope for their loved ones. And it also, most importantly, exposed my own family's hidden memories of war and disappearances. This dissertation is a project both indebted to and in solidarity with the people whose stories and memories of loved ones persist, and to those still kept secret.

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ways intelligence manifests itself. Indeed, I can't express how thankful I am to have stepped foot in that prison three years ago. I am also grateful to the Center for Teaching Excellence for awarding me two grants to conduct research on prison education based on my experiences at Auburn.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Displacement and Belonging: Locating a Central American Diaspora**

“It is time to do more than count the number of dead.  
It is time to engage the world to stop this violence against desperate migrants.”  
- General William Lacy Swing

“Centralamerican American/  
does that come with a hyphen?/  
a space?/  
Central America/  
America/  
América/  
Las Américas  
- Maya Chinchilla

Appeals to develop Central American Studies programs usually center on a language of concern. Whether growing populations of Central American students at Universities require a space of representation or whether new research within traditional disciplines illuminate a shift in areas of study, there is a call to re-center scholarly attention around issues that affect a majority minority population of Americans. The social sciences, in particular, provide affective insights on new patterns of immigration and transformative power relations that represent an emerging and diverse community of people, cultures, histories, and literatures. However, what scholarly anthologies and researchers of Central America always articulate is a desire to legitimize the various communities by claiming they represent innovative knowledge or insight into larger social issues. Certainly, I am not speaking against the development and growth of Central American Studies programs, but rather I am questioning what constitutes as formative study in Academia and what is deemed uninteresting or undeserving of study. My dissertation is an intervention in the disciplinary boundaries that still exclude comparative and marginal forms of knowledge production. I do not seek to legitimize the visibility of Central American studies through claims of demographic shifts or in response to sensational media stories of poverty and

immigration, but rather to engage with different forms of narrating that are never well-ordered and always uneasy expressions of resistance to inequality and injustice.

### **Contextualizing the Diaspora**

The diasporic community of Central Americans in the U.S. that has recently garnered attention has its roots in the mass exile movement of people during the 1970s-1980s. And while civil warfare was the primary cause of immigration during the late-twentieth century, it is important to state that a Central American diaspora continues to flee socioeconomic instability in the Isthmus. Around the same time Peace Accords were being signed in the early 1990s, the U.S., Mexico, and Canada signed the North American Free Trade Agreement that further destabilized fragile national economies and social life in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The wars had decimated agricultural development and the deportation of gang members from the U.S. back to the Isthmus introduced a new illicit culture that would intensify local class struggles and social inequality. While state sponsored militarized violence formally ended in the 90s, hemispheric trade agreements and new economic laws would thwart reconstruction efforts. According to Karina Alvarado, Alicia Estrada, and Esther Hernandez, studies of personal decisions to migrate North reveal the political and economic factors that influence new migration patterns over the last decades. For example, they claim, “[T]he compelling factors of a restructured economy, therefore, intersects the personal and political, such as with gender, since domestic and state gendered forms of violence buttress one another (Zentgraf 2005) and influence gender migration flows (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003)” (22). The shocking reality that thousands of unaccompanied migrant children are found at the U.S./Mexico border every year is not an outlier fact that skews migration data. It is the consequences of foreign trade policies and exclusionary immigration laws that exacerbated the instability of war-ridden countries.



Honduras, unlike El Salvador and Guatemala, did not undergo an intense war period in the 70s and 80s that rendered it economically and politically unstable. In its place, cocaine trafficking from South America to Mexico and the U.S. has made Honduras a major drug route and site of violence. When political tensions culminated in the 2009 coup d'états of President Zelaya, military repression in the ensuing election alongside U.S. pressure to recognize the new government ushered in an era of violence that has made Honduras the country with the highest homicide rate in the world.<sup>1</sup> But it wasn't until the unaccompanied migrant children crisis of 2014 that mainstream news media began exposing how U.S. involvement in Central America has forced the mass migration of children from Honduras. According to a report published by the International Crisis group, "The U.S., concerned about providing assistance to an unaccountable and illegitimate regime, suspended non-humanitarian aid, including counter-narcotics assistance. The result was a 'cocaine gold rush,' as traffickers hurried to secure routes through the region" (*Corridor of Violence*). The drug trafficking networks that make Honduras a layover point in trade exploit weak law enforcement policies in the vulnerable region of the Guatemala/Honduras border. Indeed, with no international recognition of the post-2009 coup election, Honduras had become a "cocaine gold rush" for traffickers remapping trade routes along spaces of transition. Today, the rush to secure control over the region has introduced a violent social order of belonging in Honduras. Gangs like MS-13 offer safety and class mobility to youth populations that are marginalized by domestic social inequalities. Draconian punitive measures, conversely, have only solidified the presence of gangs in the country and allowed them to organize in spaces of extreme poverty, rounding up groups of social outcasts and giving them a sense of purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/ropan/en/BorderControl/drug-trafficking.html>

In Chapter One of this dissertation, I take exception to Sonia Nazario's book, *Enrique's Journey* for glossing over the complex social conditions that account for gender migration flows to the U.S. from Honduras. Violence in the country is a never-ending cycle of consumption that forces women who are victims of domestic abuse and homicide to attempt to flee, and then feasts on vulnerable children left behind. The narratives of economic betterment that have informed historical migrations to the U.S. are insufficient modes of analysis for the study of present day Central American migration. I turn to these issues of violence in my work not to cater to liberal Western sensibilities of pity or stigmatize Central America as a place of perpetual violence and instability, but rather to examine how the creative work of diasporic thinkers and activists imagines new and better futures.

### **The Imagined Community**

Questions about representing a diverse study of Central Americanness first consider the strengths and limits of identity markers. In the article, "Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World," Arturo Arias uses the hyphenated term created by Maya Chinchilla in reference to Latino/a/xs born or raised in the U.S. with Central American ancestry. It is his way of making second generation Central American subjects visible and marking their presentability in a nation that has historically marginalized the community. However, for Claudia Milian, the hyphenated and redundant use of "American" signals an identity in transition, one that has "yet to arrive within signifiers of U.S. Latinoness."<sup>2</sup> The most often used term, conversely, is U.S. Central American because it functions as a reclamation of a transnational self by the children of Central American

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<sup>2</sup> See Milian, Claudia. "Central American-Americanness, Latino/a Studies, and the Global South." *The Global South*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2011, pp. 137–152. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/globalsouth.5.1.137](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/globalsouth.5.1.137).

immigrants. Karina Alvarado states that the term “includes differentiating [our]selves from a purely Central American and North American banner” (372). These multiple iterations of varying identity markers perform the very fluid experience of existing in diaspora and suggest a labor of sorts second generation Central Americans must embrace; that is, they must assume the burden of having to document what has been historically undocumented. Still, almost always the conflicting locations of belonging, the U.S. and Central America, clash at the moment of separation, whether through the hyphen or in the in-between blank spaces of U.S. Central American.

Conversely, in “EpiCentro: The Emergence of a New Central American-American Literature,” Arturo Arias’ concern with Central Americanness functions as a point of intervention for conceptualizations of Latinidad. Instead of thinking of Latinidad as a trope where “hyphenated nationalities seek refuge,” Arias argues for a reading of Central American-American writers that problematizes traditional understandings of Latino/a/x identity. Writers like Karina Alvarado and Marlon Morales produce poetry that continuously attempts to renegotiate and renegotiate a bicultural identity that transcends their relationships to nation-states. To be and live as Central American-American, Arias argues, is to inhabit an identity that is always in flux. Similarly, in “Diasporic Reparations: Repairing the Social Imaginaries of Central America in the Twenty-First Century,” Ana Patricia Rodriguez claims that unresolved historical issues and ongoing violence in Central America fundamentally inform transnational Central American subject formation. When grappling with the conditions that produced a diaspora of Central Americans, diasporic writers engage in a literature troubled by the impossibility of righting or repairing historical violence. A problematic past is constantly

informing the present, shifting how Central Americans born or living abroad narrate a relationship to their countries of origin.

At the same time that Central American-Americans must grapple with generational trauma and a sense of indeterminacy, the criminalization of brown bodies further perpetuates their experiences of alienation and displacement. In “Visual Counter Narratives: Central American Art of Migration and Criminality,” Kency Cornejo argues that the criminalization of Central Americans is tied to both an “aesthetics of violence” produced during the civil wars and to the United States’ role in the rise of transnational gang culture. Thus, she claims that Central American visual artists provide counter narratives to the dominant storylines that overlook how historical processes of exploitation and oppression hypercriminalize brown bodies long before they cross national borders. Here, Cornejo turns to the artistic production of the Isthmus to trace the ways U.S. intervention has helped maintain an unstable region that still produces an exodus of people. Her intervention to an understanding of Central Americanness resides in the claim that Central American-Americans are undeniably defined by the ways in which criminalization displaces the Isthmus.

Indeed, while Central American-American writers creatively problematize traditional notions of Latinidad and identity-formation, as Arias states, it is also important to understand how legal status and U.S. immigration laws affect traditional forms of belonging. In “Legal Violence: Immigration Law and Lives of Central American Immigrants,” Cecilia Menjívar and Leisy Abrego analyze how the convergence of immigration and criminal law constitute new forms of violence. They coin the term “legal violence” to expose how the criminalization of migrants at the federal, state, and local levels affects their everyday lives and incorporation processes. In the criminalization of legally vulnerable people, they argue, migrants and their

families experience a normalized violence that positions them in a precarious state of being. Much like Cornejo's study of Central American visual art, Menjívar and Abrego's analysis of immigration law reveals that the hypercriminalization of Central American migrants in the U.S. facilitates an experience of violence that is not only incessant, but also exploitative. The geographical region of the Isthmus and its historical violence does not exist or persist in isolation. U.S. intervention both abroad and domestically creates the problems that both force people to migrate north and prevent their incorporation into American society and culture.

Ariana Vigil's debut book, *War Echoes: Gender and Militarization in U.S. Latino/a Cultural Production*, examines U.S. Latino/a subject formation in relationship to U.S. military intervention in Central America and the Middle East. She uses U.S. Latino/a literature and cultural production to showcase how different Latino/a communities make sense of state violence. In particular, chapters one and three focus on transnational Latino/a production that gestures towards a praxis of solidarity predicated on the recognition of difference. Highlighting a "glocal" perspective, Vigil's work contemplates the ways transnational solidarity can reveal a Latinidad that is not homogenous. In her analysis of communal storytelling and gendered experiences of violence, she showcases how cross-cultural Latino/a productions can truthfully represent specific histories of violence while simultaneously illustrating the ways revolution develops at local, national, and transnational levels. The coalitional productions at work in Vigil's book represent a Central Americanness that is unique, important, and in conversation with larger U.S. Latino/a issues. I place her text in dialogue with scholars of Central American American studies in order to outline how academics are imagining a more inclusive future for a vulnerable Central American population.

This dissertation will consider the historical violence that has obscured a U.S. Central American imaginary and churned out missing bodies. Specifically, I will challenge the logic of coloniality and its institutions of representation to consider the multiple forms of resistance that Central American subjects enact in order to exist and articulate a sense of self outside the language of power. Consisting of four chapters, *Archives of Failure* will first examine how U.S. Central American writers expose the logic of coloniality in their imaginative work about identity formation and historical violence. The second chapter studies a haunting incompleteness that informs two postwar Central American novels written within and outside of the U.S.: Sylvia Seller's García's *When the Ground Turns in its Sleep* and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (Senselessness). Chapter three complicates the legal recovery of memories, bodies, and belonging by rethinking how a liberal human rights discourse fails to account for gendered violence in Oscar Martínez's *The Beast*, Claudia Hernández's *De Fronteras*, and the performance art of Regina J. Galindo. While chapter four investigates how the activist work of both a twentieth century literary collective called El Pocho Che and the Electronic Disturbance Theatre reorient the struggle for social justice into new spaces and engage in a decolonial practice of resistance.

## CHAPTER ONE

**Errant Voices: The Coloniality of Power and Failure in U.S. Central American Writing**

if the world is fracture and uncertainty/  
 let us take comfort in the unknown/...  
 let us take comfort in the unknown/  
 the world is fracture and uncertainty  
 – Adela Najarro

Unless we document ourselves we are invisible!/  
 there is so much left to do./  
 I'm taking on telling the truth/  
 I'm just a revolutionary mama/  
 solidarity, baby  
 – Maya Chinchilla

In April 2017, Tia Chucha Press released a debut anthology titled, *The Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the United States*. According to the book's distributor, the Northwestern University Press, it is the "first-ever comprehensive literary survey of the Central American diaspora by a U.S. publisher..."<sup>3</sup> Yet inasmuch as it is celebrated for being the first collection of its kind, introducing a kaleidoscopic representation of Central American identity in the U.S., *The Wandering Song* also addresses how the temporality of the text defines its importance. For Leticia Hernandez Linares, a Salvadoran-American poet and co-editor of the anthology, the book is a gathering and presentation of "all these words here, in this time and place, without proposing to define or limit what Central American Literature is or will be. Rather, we offer a significant piece of a much larger picture" (10).<sup>4</sup> The anthology marks a special literary moment not simply because it is the "first-ever comprehensive literary survey of the Central American diaspora," but also because it simultaneously introduces U.S. Central American writers as extensions of the Isthmus, insofar as the marker "Central American

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<sup>3</sup> *The Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the U.S.* The Northwestern University Press, 2017, <http://www.nupress.northwestern.edu/content/wandering-song>

<sup>4</sup> Leticia Linares Hernandez is a Salvadoran-American poet born in Los Angeles, CA, but raised in the Bay Area where she still lives and writes.

Literature” includes the voices in *Wandering Song*. The drive to research, document, and assemble the voices of a diasporic community into an anthology is to communicate an epistemology of Central Americanness that is divorced from overbearing understandings of the Isthmus as backwards, outside of Western notions of progress. It is a way of speaking back to the logic of coloniality and a way of framing a particular Latino/a/x difference.

If, according to Brent Edwards in *The Practice of Diapora*, the anthology “delimits the borders of an expressive mode or field, determining its beginning and end points, its local or global resonance, its communities of participants and audiences,”<sup>5</sup> then Hernandez Linares’ statement about *Wandering Song* defines the anthology’s borders by marking it borderless, and determines its range of “beginning and end points” by claiming it timeless and asserting not to know what Central American Literature will become. The preface of this anthology frames U.S. Central American identity and culture as fluid: ways of being and knowing that are always momentary, framed as a process of arriving. Unlike other U.S. ethnic anthologies that have incorporated racialized identities into a specific U.S. literary tradition, the editors of *Wandering Song* do not seek to interpellate Central American writers into a fixed, traditional canon or to make the Central American subject accessible to a first world audience.<sup>6</sup> What is at stake, rather, is the desire to change the discourse of belonging that has been defined by dominant and oppressive forces of power. Thus, the preface must argue that what the anthology ultimately presents is an expression of Central Americanness that is excessive to the nation state while simultaneously claiming that such an expression is constitutive of the national culture it inhabits.

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<sup>5</sup> Edwards, 44

<sup>6</sup> Edwards close reads *The Book of American Negro Poetry* by James Weldon Johnson as an anthology that seeks to integrate the black subject as part of American culture



A shared history of violence and displacement informs the thematic and formal structure of the *Wandering Song*. It is composed of three sections that at moments highlight the experiences of Central American refugees from the wars of the 1980s, while at other moments provide insight into the social issues that inform growing up Central American in the U.S. The notion of “failure” also influences the multi-genre collection of poems, short stories, essays, novel excerpts, and nonfiction. For the writers, failure structures the myriad of sociopolitical issues they struggle against: immigration laws that failed to protect Central American asylum seekers in the 1980s, and the contemporary legal discourses that criminalize undocumented migrants; the failure to remember a homeland; or the failure to account for missing bodies, loved ones lost to the decades of violence that inform a continuous Central American exodus to the U.S. Accordingly, as the title of the anthology suggests, *The Wandering Song* gives imaginative play to the way errantry disrupts problematic claims to universality that often inform discussions of anthologies. These errant subjects move across space and text, writing or rather singing with contingency and seeking solace through shared experiences of loss. They do not purport to document a tradition of Central American Literature within the U.S., nor do they seek to occasion a momentous breakthrough in U.S. literary history, finally articulating a space of visibility for the Central American subject. Instead, they offer a corrective to the universalization of American identity within the frame of the text: by titling the book, “Central American Writing in the United States,” the writers displace the U.S. as the primary space of meaning making and production. They regard the nation state as merely a subsection of a larger American space they inhabit.

While Central American and U.S. literary history are invoked in the anthology’s production and distribution, questions about political and social dispossession dominate the

content. After centuries of U.S. imperial control over Latin America, the uprising of socialist movements across the Isthmus during the late twentieth century intensified U.S. foreign policies and domestic laws of control. On the one hand, U.S. military intervention in Central America during the 1980s was less about preventing the spread of communism and more about the containment of the Isthmus' economy.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the rise of disciplinary measures like detention centers in the U.S. during the same decade reveals that the preservation of nation-state sovereignty relies heavily on the hyperbolic discipline of racialized bodies. Both forms of policing, moreover, highlight the many ways in which legal acts of prevention and deterrence have rendered bodies of color as criminal and deviant, ushering in what many would claim to be a new era of systematic oppression.<sup>8</sup> And while the contemporary “war on terror” in the Middle East has sensationalized new fears of an invading brownness, the legal marginalization of disenfranchised brown bodies has a complex Western hemispheric history worth noting. In effect, I claim that the contemporary and militarized enforcement of law and order is a result of legal practices already at work throughout the late twentieth century.

This chapter will analyze how the concepts of “failure” and “recovery” structure what Anibal Quijano terms the “coloniality of power,” and enable an overwhelming history of violence to persist across the Americas. First, I will provide a brief survey of work by hemispheric thinkers like Anibal Quijano, José David Saldívar, and Maria Lugones to situate the many theorizations of coloniality that inform Empire making. Then, I will cross-examine the ways in which the discourse of failure and recovery in relationship to the coloniality of power has been historically deployed to construct categories of differences between marginalized

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<sup>7</sup> See Grandin, Greg. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. 1st Owl books ed. New York: Metropolitan/Owl Books, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> I will expand on this notion using Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*

populations. I argue that the discursive relationship between failure and recovery both within U.S. boundaries and abroad naturalized the imperial drive of U.S. Empire expansion. Moreover, the use of race-neutral terms in the 1970s to characterize repressive punitive tactics within U.S. borders influenced the speculative and vague language of the 1980 Refugee Act. The desire to create a viable and coherent refugee act in 1980 moved away from humanitarian assistance and centered instead on a preoccupation with the containment of racialized others. I will reference court cases and legal documents to highlight how the grammar of speculation that structures the 1980 Refugee Act turned would-be refugees into undocumented criminals, always already foreclosing personhood to a particular group of people. Instead of providing a well-organized path to asylum, the Refugee Act excluded some groups from the very possibility of becoming refugees, creating a class of permanently stateless people. Finally, I will discuss how U.S. Central American writers employ alternative understandings of failure that imagine new frameworks of belonging and being. Specifically, I use J.J. Habermas's *Queer Art of Failure* to argue that unbeing and unbelonging are ways of confronting historical violence, forgetting, and methods of discipline that yield missing bodies in the anthology, *The Wandering Song*. In doing so, I argue that the communities' shared experiences of violence and the errant nature of their writing produces what José David Saldívar terms "oppositional versions of history."<sup>9</sup> Their failure is a protest that engenders a new space of visibility outside of colonial tropes and ideologies, articulating a re-construction of the world they inhabit and envisioning different social relationships.

### **Coloniality of Power and Failure**

Our humanity is a privilege. This basic and disturbing notion informs the work of the

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<sup>9</sup> Saldívar, José David. *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, And Literary History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991

modernity/coloniality research program. According to Arturo Escobar, the conceptualization of “modernity/coloniality” is grounded in a series of interrelated operations:

(1) an emphasis on locating the origins of modernity with the Conquest of America and the control of the Atlantic after 1492, rather than in the most commonly accepted landmarks such as the Enlightenment or the end of the eighteenth century; (2) a persistent attention to colonialism and the making of the capitalist world system as constitutive of modernity; this includes a determination not to overlook the economy and its concomitant forms of exploitation; (3) consequently, the adoption of a world perspective in the explanation of modernity... (4) the identification of the domination of others outside the European core as a necessary dimension of modernity, with the concomitant subalternization of the knowledge and cultures of these other groups (184).

Framing the origins of modernity within the colonization of Latin America is a necessary step in understanding the social, political, and economic inequalities that proliferate throughout the western hemisphere today. For, as Escobar summarizes, the successful domination of the Americas required a reordering of social processes and space in which “race became the fundamental criterion” for the classification of populations into hierarchies.<sup>10</sup> Then, to maintain dominion over land and resources, colonial empires consolidated around the idea that rationality/modernity was a Eurocentric phenomenon justifying the conquest of the Americas and European/white superiority. While the racialized other was deemed inferior, nonhuman, and expendable, lacking rationality and thus incapable of social incorporation. As such, an uneven claim to global power by white Europeans began to accrue at the intersections of racial subordination and labor exploitation. The success of the new capitalist world system depended

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<sup>10</sup> Quijano, 183

on the belief that Europe was the center of knowledge of production and progress, placing the concentration of resources and means of production in the hands of a ruling and oppressive minority.

Within this relationship of racial subordination and labor exploitation is where the coloniality of power manifests itself. It is important to note here that the term, “coloniality,” refers to the logic and matrices of power (institutional practices like religion, education, government, etc.) active today that were created by processes of colonization. Unlike other terms of study such as “postcolonialism,” coloniality traces the power differentials that continue to exist in practice despite formal independence or breaks from colonial regimes.<sup>11</sup> When approached this way, the historical episode of conquest and domination that defined the Americas for centuries is re-narrated as an always present condition, located in the here and now of our social, economic, and political lives. Thus, “coloniality of power,” coined by one of the leading thinkers in the M/C research program, Anibal Quijano, is a concept that stresses the contemporaneity of power relations established by colonialization. In “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” Quijano writes, “the early association of the new racial identities of the colonized with the forms of control of unpaid, unwaged labor developed among the Europeans the singular perception that paid labor was the whites’ privilege... [T]he control of labor in the new model of global power was constituted thus, articulating all historical forms of labor control around the capitalist wage-labor relation” (539). This foundational control of labor facilitated the interrelated production of new forms of subjugation insofar as racialized groups (Indians, blacks, and mestizos) and their heterogeneous cultures, resources, and histories

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<sup>11</sup> For a more nuanced discussion on the differences and similarities between the terms of study see *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Duke University Press, 2008. Edited by Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui

were incorporated into a matrix of power that strictly placed Europe at the center of global relations. In other words, having control over exploitative labor practices gave colonizers the freedom to control other methods of cultural production. For example, they repressed non-European forms of knowledge production by controlling the production of meaning (Enlightenment ideology) and means of expression (imposition of European languages). In doing so, colonialism allowed for the rise of, as Quijano states, “one global cultural order revolving around European or Western hegemony” (540).

In a reference study by Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, titled, “Americanness as a Concept, or the Americas in the Imaginary of the Modern-World System,” the authors trace the cross-genealogy of the Americas through the concept of “Americanness.” By claiming this neologism, they purport to think of the Americas as a colonial invention that developed within a four-fold process: “coloniality, ethnicity, racism, and the concept of newness itself” (550). These disparate but interrelated ideas became intimately connected to the rise of capitalism and its consolidation in Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. However, when formal colonial states ended through various wars of independence, the hierarchy of coloniality organized itself around the classification, or rather reclassifications of people vis-à-vis the concepts of culture and ethnicity. Quijano and Wallerstein state,

Coloniality was an essential element in the integration of a new interstate system, creating not only rank order but sets of rules for the interactions of states with each others. Thus it was the very efforts of those at the bottom of the rank order to overcome their low ranking served in many ways to secure the rank order. The administrative boundaries established by the colonial authorities had had a certain fluidity in that, from the perspective of the metropole, the essential boundary line was that of the empire vis-à-

vis other metropolitan empires. It was decolonization that fixed the stateness of the decolonized states... The independences crystallized the stateness of these states as the realm within which the communal sentiment of nationalism could breed and flourish. They confirmed the states in their hierarchy. Independence did not undo coloniality; it merely transformed its outer form (550).

The shifting of power from empire to free states made it possible for ethnicity to emerge as a way of locating identity and status within the state itself and between other states too. But unlike the fixed boundaries of empire that incorporated various global territories, as states gained independence they remade the borders of nationhood and belonging, changing the communal boundaries of ethnic groups as well. In this way, Americanness is a European invention that entails the continuous invention of new forms of control: worldviews, institutions, and discourses that preserve the hierarchical power structure of colonialism. For Quijano and Wallerstein, moreover, it is important to consider how the historical emergence of coloniality, ethnicity, racism, and newness produced “Americanness” in order to understand the different ways the coloniality of power reveals itself in today’s global power relations.

The idea that the coloniality of power interpellates and transcends the hemispheric Americas guides the comparative work of José David Saldívar’s 2011 book, *Trans-Americanness*. In the text, Saldívar builds on Quijano’s and Wallerstein’s article to remap the global significance of literary and cultural work that is often ignored or underrepresented in traditional areas of study. Specifically, he advances a comparative, “outernational” study of texts that relocate attention away from the hegemonic Global North, producing “a dramatic shift in trans-American sociological, historical, and cultural acting and thinking from the nation-state level to a thinking and acting at the planetary and world systems level” (xvi). In doing so, Saldívar focuses

on border and diasporic thinking as epistemologies of the subaltern that articulate diverse and multiple forms of knowledge production within a “transmodernist world” that is governed by new forms of coloniality. He claims that the countercultural production of minoritized subjects from Chicano/a writers in the U.S. to South Asian thinkers is at once a way of imagining alternative possibilities of comparisons and a response to the violence impelled by modernity/coloniality. His intention is not to conflate the diverse experiences and histories of global marginalized communities, but rather to examine how the catastrophic experience of coloniality as terror and violence moves across different spaces and temporalities, displacing, disorienting, and silencing the other. In essence, much like I seek to argue in my own work, what is at stake in Saldívar’s outernational approach to literary studies is a confrontation with the coloniality of power and its perverse manifestations across different world systems.

As an intervention to the male dominated discourses I’ve been surveying, I’d like to turn to Maria Lugones’ exploration of gender and its relationship to coloniality/modernity. According to her article, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” colonialism introduced a new gender system for colonized peoples that created different arrangements of being than it did for white, wealthy colonizers. Pushing the limits of Quijano’s work on coloniality/modernity, Lugones is interested in thinking through the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality as a way of understanding different patterns of violence. According to Lugones, insofar as Quijano’s “coloniality of power” defines the social relations of domination and exploitation that generate a Eurocentric, capitalist control over every facet of existence, his argument that “the control of ‘sexual access, its resources and products’ define the domain of sex/gender” is too narrow (189). The fault is in the assumption that “sexual access, its resources and products” is defined by patriarchal and heterosexual understandings of sex. She further



claims, “[U]nderstanding these features of the organization of gender in the modern/colonial gender system- the biological dimorphism, the patriarchal and heterosexual organizations of relations – is crucial to an understanding of the differential gender arrangements along ‘racial’ lines” (190). The elements that constitute the coloniality of power are always in relation to one another and none precedes the other. Thus, Lugones’ intervention is to shift the logic of relations from thinking about the coloniality of power and modernity as “structural axes” to embracing the concept of intersectionality. Under this framework, gender itself is placed under scrutiny as a colonial invention further illustrating the varying methods of domination that continue to produce patterns of violence and abuse.

### **The Failure/Recovery Paradigm and Coloniality of Power**

Before I give an overview on the ways both “failure” and “recovery” have been employed as discursive dimensions of the coloniality of power, I’d like to parse out what I mean by the very words failure and recovery. Prevalent U.S. discussions about the Isthmus and other Third World countries often narrate these non-Western spaces as lacking sustainable methods of development and improvement because they are socially, politically, and economically deficient or inept. They are, in short, pathologized as failures of capitalist progress, or, as is largely declared: poor, underdeveloped countries. In turn, when crises of panic and violence erupt in these same spaces due to sociopolitical unrest or natural disasters, the U.S. places the burden upon itself to be the purveyor of humanitarian aid or enlightened political doctrine. For example, when middle-class Cubans fled communist controlled Cuba in 1959, the U.S. offered political asylum to these exiled migrants. As benefiteres of open refugee policies, they were also given the opportunity to experience an economic revival of sorts; that is, they were legally able to regain or

remake their fortunes under the guide of democratic freedom.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, when socialist movements threatened the democratic future of the Isthmus in the 1970s-1990s, the U.S. instead enforced a militarized intervention to rescue nation states from the dangerous spread of anti-democratic politics. Refugee laws were then reformed to deny entry to Central American migrants fleeing authoritarian, right wing regimes. Recovery, here, would not become a Western practice of sociopolitical aid or enlightenment until the United Nations demanded that the countries in conflict sign peace accords in the early 1990s, and, by then, recovery meant recuperating the missing and destroyed bodies left ravaged by decades of warfare.

From here on out, I will call the discursive interplay of failure and recovery, the failure/recovery paradigm because it displays the logic of coloniality and the practices of empire making. As I briefly implied above, narrating Third World spaces as failures in need of recovering or rescuing demands redefining the boundaries of citizenship and exerting control over the social classification of peoples with naturalized understandings of inferiority and superiority. Inasmuch as the U.S. has the capacity to extend or redact the privileges of citizenship to fleeing migrants, it is also invested in devising techniques of control for the management of racialized populations abroad and at home. For instance, at the turn of the twentieth century, U.S. imperial domination of Latin America and the Caribbean solidified around corporate models of exploitation. According to Jason Colby in “‘Banana Growing and Negro Management’: Race, Labor, and Jim Crow Colonialism in Guatemala, 1884-1930,” in the early decades of the twentieth century, the United Fruit Company “was the largest agricultural enterprise in the world and the dominant economic force of the Caribbean Basin. Within this framework, then,

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<sup>12</sup> See García, Maria Cristina. *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. Print.

‘colonialism’ does not necessarily require the existence of a colonial state, but rather direct foreign control over production and labor in a host society...” (599). Colby argues that while commercial endeavors like the construction of the Panama Canal became visible moments of “an expansive U.S. empire,” the transference of U.S. domestic racial and labor practices to countries like Guatemala reified local hierarchies and social relations. On the one hand, when the exportation of coffee became the source of “national progress” in the 1870s, labor laws forced Indigenous Mayans into agricultural labor that brought in a new age of indentured servitude. Local racialized conceptions of national identity then reinforced the racial divide between Ladinos and Indians. Ladinos were recruited to higher agricultural job positions and thus exempt from coercive labor laws, setting them apart from and superior to their Indigenous counterparts. On the other hand, along with the importation of African-American workers to fulfill labor demands in Guatemala came Jim Crow practices that marginalized a recently emancipated black community. Their subjection to harsh working conditions in the railroad industry and experience of racist and violent treatment from white elites encouraged black laborers to flee. In response, the Guatemalan government endorsed anti-black violence in the form of vagrancy laws to reinforce obedience to the state and protect the interests of railroad contractors.

What is perhaps most interesting about Colby’s insight on the transference of U.S. labor and racist practices to Guatemala, however, is the incorporation of a diplomat’s memoir. *The Education of A Diplomat* is a personal recollection of Hugh Wilson’s experiences as U.S. charge d’affaires in Guatemala City. Beginning in 1912, the memoir navigates a Guatemalan country in political and socioeconomic transition. The banana enclaves that embellish the scenic routes of Wilson’s railroad travels and his encounter with a robust, but innocuous Negro workforce suggest that the vast agricultural empire of the United Fruit Company was a systematic

machinery of production. The exportation of crops like coffee and banana required the importation of U.S. racialized forms of management in collusion with Guatemalan practices of racial discrimination. Nonetheless, before the proliferation of U.F.C owned banana and coffee plantations, the acquisition of land by foreign entities was made possible through a monopolization of landholdings, and legal loopholes in questions of citizenship. Wilson explains the conundrum between citizenship and land owning elites by stating,

[I]t seemed as if numerous prospective mothers, Guatemalan, Honduran and others, had taken trips to the United States for the sole purpose of having their children born on our territory and thus escaping... many of the vexations of life with which citizens of the country were harassed... I then went on to explain that if the Guatemalan government admitted the right of its citizens to become Americans and enjoy the privileges of American citizens on their return to Guatemala, every man of sufficient fortune in the country would take out our citizenship as a guarantee to his property... The result would be a privileged property class owing no allegiance to the President... (55, 57-58).

At the same time that black bodies were being exported to Guatemala for exploitative and underpaid labor, the claims to American citizenship by Guatemalan children born in U.S. soil and then returning to Guatemala replaced local production and the local ruling class. For land owning Guatemalans, the U.S. logic that citizenship was the privilege of property owners secured their right to land and gave them the ability to escape “the vexations of life with which citizens of the country were harassed.” This property owning class of people would find sanctuary in U.S. conceptualizations of citizenship and thus benefit from an exceptional social status in Guatemala while further stratifying the country’s race relations. Moreover, because labor and class status segmented along racial lines, the management of indigenous and black

bodies also entailed quelling revolts against unfair treatment in the plantations. In Jim Crow logic, this meant white landowning Americans in Guatemala expected exemptions for acts of racial violence against rebellions.<sup>13</sup> Undeniably, the rise of the colonial banana republic exacerbated racial tensions, but it was the Guatemalan government's failure to contain commercial interests within national boundaries and a monolithic U.S. presence in the country that repressed larger revolutions. Until, that is, the democratic land reforms of the 1940s, which redistributed land rights to Indigenous communities and threatened the hegemonic control of the U.F.C. Empire.

As I have mentioned, the drive to contain Central America's national economies culminated in the outbreak of several civil wars across the Isthmus. The intense violence affected largely peasant communities in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador and forced people to flee in fear of persecution, leading millions of migrants in search of political asylum. But, unlike the 1959 Cuban Revolution, in which a diaspora of communist-fleeing Cuban refugees found political support under U.S. migratory acts accommodating a "humanitarian crisis," Central American exiles were both denied asylum in accordance with reformed policies like the 1980 Refugee Act, and reclassified as unauthorized migrants. For example, the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 and its subsequent amendments such as the commonly titled, "Refugee-Escapee Act of 1957", in conversation with the Immigration Nationality Act of 1952 reflected anti-communist Cold War sentiments and produced a language of calculated aid that shifted processes of legitimization and admittance. Whereas the Acts functioned on a national origins quota system that preserved a kind of cultural balance in the U.S. and appeased xenophobic sentiments, the ad hoc nature of refugee admittances allowed for policy exceptions that rendered the quota system

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<sup>13</sup> Colby, 612

unnecessary and incorporated a particular class of U.S. residents<sup>14</sup>. Although legislators saw such an approach to refugee law as unorganized, the sociopolitical movements of the mid twentieth century incited a change to legal and immigration policy that transmogrified our understanding of humanitarian crises from an era of political relief into an age of mass dehumanization and incarceration. Thus, I argue that it is not mere coincidence that Regan's war on drugs and a clandestine war against communism ushered in a new punitive system denying any legal and social value to migrants seeking political asylum in the United States. And because I read the 1980 Refugee Act as a unique historical moment that marks an inconsistency in U.S. foreign policy and a turn to speculative immigration practices, I will engage in a close reading of asylum cases that illustrate how an-Other vulnerable population become targets of regulatory practices that mark them as deserving of punishment but unworthy of legal protection. The people fleeing civil wars across Central America became interpolated into a permanent status of rightlessness ineligible for personhood.

According to Edward Kennedy, who helped pioneer the 1980 Refugee Act, the Act has six stated objectives. The first three redefine who constitutes as refugee and how many people a year may be given refugee status, while the latter three focus on congressional control when it comes to admitting refugees and, most importantly, on "an explicit asylum provision in the immigration law" (143). Of the 50,000 refugee admittance limit per year, 5,000 asylum cases were allocated for "persons already in the United States who were unable to return to their native countries because of a well founded fear of persecution" (154). Although the Act raised the number of refugees who may seek asylum, the larger context of the act, wherein asylum provisions were integrated in immigration law, makes evident Congress's willingness to restrict

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<sup>14</sup> The Hunagrian Escape Act of 1958 granted Hungarians refugee status after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 failed

admissions under U.N. protocol. That is, at this intersection of domestic and foreign policy resides a thinly masked call for an increase in immigration enforcement and any subsequent deportation measures. If the 5,000 limit ceiling mark was to provide an efficient approach to global humanitarian crises, it also foreclosed any acknowledgment that a “well founded fear of persecution” could be rooted in structural and state sanctioned violence; instead, the Act individualized terror, displacing blame and responsibility unto the individuals fleeing from their native countries.

As an architect of the Act, Edward Kennedy sought to establish an Act that would protect the rights of those who qualified for asylum, yet those fleeing Latin American civil wars funded by the U.S. government occupied a liminal state of belonging insofar as they were caught in a series of legal trappings that ultimately transformed would be refugees into law-breaking, undocumented subjects. I claim liminal because the asylum seeker is always already in a state of transition, not quite imagined outside the law and not quite protected by it. Unlike immigration laws that have historically excluded people from a specific national origin, the asylum seeker under the 1980 Refugee Act had to prove his/her case for inclusion. They are victims of particular processes of legitimization that could render them law-abiding visitors or unlawful aliens, a status that excludes them from legal protection. Indeed, what “proof of a well founded fear of persecution” illustrates is that such a speculative approach to the legal integration of vulnerable people covertly functions as a form of criminalization. The criminalization of asylum seekers already in the U.S. operates by instituting a rule of law that cannot be followed.

In the 1984-85 case, *Cardoza-Fonseca v. INS*, 767 F.2d 1448, 1453 (9th Cir. 1985), petitioner, Luz Cardoza-Fonesca, lost a battle of semantics with the Board of Immigration Appeal that resulted in her deportation. She was a citizen of Nicaragua who entered the U.S. as a

non-immigrant visitor in 1979, but was apprehended by INS for staying in the U.S. beyond authorization. At her deportation appeals hearing, Cardoza-Fonesca appealed an order from the Board holding that said she failed “to introduce any objective evidence under the clear probability standard demonstrating that they would have been subject to persecution. On appeal, the court reversed the Board's decision, holding that the Board applied the wrong standard to petitioners' case. The court held that the Board should have applied the well-founded standard under the Refugee Act, 8 U.S.C.S. § 1158(a), instead of the clear probability standard under the Immigration and Nationality Act (IMA)” (U.S. Supreme Court). While the appeals hearing identified a mistrial of asylum request, Cardoza-Fonesca was not given political sanctuary or temporary stay within the U.S. because according to the facts summary of the court’s transcript,

the immigration judge applied only a "clear probability of persecution" standard and determined that Cardoza-Fonseca was not entitled to relief from deportation. The BIA affirmed, stating that no matter what burden of proof Cardoza-Fonseca [\*\*3] faced, whether " 'clear probability,' 'good reason' or 'realistic likelihood, '" all of which the Board thought to be identical, she failed to show that she "would suffer persecution" (emphasis added). The Board also reasoned that her claim failed because she had not introduced any objective evidence to demonstrate that she "will be subject to persecution" (emphasis added). Cardoza-Fonseca appeals only from the denial of her claim for relief under section 208(a) (Ocariz).

It seems that Cardoza-Fonesca could have “claimed for relief under section 208(a)” of the 1980 Refugee Act, but her requests for asylum under 208(a) were made after the initiation of deportation proceedings. Court documents state that when requests for asylum under 208(a) are “made after the initiation of deportation proceedings, [they] are also considered as requests for a



prohibition against deportation under 243(h)” (Ocariz). This interplay between immigration and refugee law elucidates a series of vague and speculative understandings of political redress for would-be asylees who cannot explicitly claim fear of persecution. In Cardoza-Fonesca’s inability to prove she “would suffer persecution,” even there could be “clear probability,” the possibility of violence is allowed and recognized by the court.

The statement, “clear possibility of persecution.” illustrates not only what may be considered an inconsequential sequence of thought, whereas “probability” is a measurement of relative possibility and “clear” simply signals the transparency of the relative possibility, but also reveals that the subject as refugee is always already unrecognizable under law. Legal meaning-making here functions on the concept of criminality, from Cardoza-Fonesca’s visa overstay to the mistrial of information that displaces her vulnerable legal status into a space of illegibility – not an undocumented migrant seeking to withhold deportation, but also not yet refugee. The asylum petitioner caught between the difficult task of proving either “clear possibility of persecution” or “well-founded fear of persecution” becomes an inaccessible body that cannot be incorporated into immigration or refugee law. In this case, she is a fiction of legal doctrine whose transformation from “illegal alien” to asylee or U.S. resident is dependent on the transparency of her ethical claims and the facts of violence that justify whether or not the state should extend political help. Yet, disavowing her criminal status at the site of a deportation hearing could not be possible in part because the hearing was never meant to recant how the court misrecognized her as a criminal. That is, her criminal status could not be renounced because any possibility of redress was foreclosed when requests for asylum were “made after the initiation of deportation proceedings.”

Cardoza-Fonesca's very humanity is at stake in a court of law designed to create criminalized identities that are intangible. Such a form of criminalization, according to Lisa Cacho, is a form of social death because it makes a certain population "ineligible for personhood" and "it not only defines who does not matter, it also makes mattering meaningful" or in this case, mattering meaningless. For example, in a previous asylum case known as *Bolanos-Hernandez vs. INS*, the court concluded, "a recognition of the difference between the standards comports with the structure of the Immigration Act. We said that there is a valid reason for applying a stricter standard where an alien claims he or she is entitled to a mandatory prohibition against deportation than where that person is asking only that he or she be found eligible for consideration for a grant of asylum, a grant that ultimately will be made or denied by the Attorney General in the exercise of his discretion" (*Bolanos-Hernandez vs. INS*). The meanings previously assigned to refugees, such as "humanitarian concern for the oppressed" as noted in President Eisenhower's letter that accompanied the draft of the Refugee Relief Act, have been eliminated when placed in relationship with illegal immigration and deportation laws. In court cases regarding asylum, the state asks people to demand their recognition as law-abiding immigrants, "where that person is asking only that he or she be found eligible for consideration for a grant of asylum," while simultaneously refuting their personhood, "where an *alien* claims he or she is entitled to a mandatory prohibition against deportation" (my emphasis). Regardless of one's subject position, the precarious truth of one's existence is purposely impossible to relate or apprehend.

The 1980 Refugee Act was part of an immigration reform policy that turned out to be a hostile attempt to deny asylum to communities of color fleeing U.S. supported dictatorships. Likewise, today's U.S. immigration policies and the institutions that enforce them signal a failure

of governance that is strategic and intentional. Alicia Schmidt-Camacho argues in “Hailing the Twelve Million” that from 2003-2010, when the undocumented population of the U.S. reached twelve million people, a broken immigration system cultivated a regime of exclusion and deferral that “installed a peculiar...form of governmentality based on failure” (5). She argues that the U.S. security state is invested in state sanctioned and extralegal forms of violence against migrants instead of providing a path to legalization for undocumented people. Moreover, when such violence is disguised by a rhetoric of brokenness or disorder, the security state serves a particular function for the Government and institutions of punishment: “[B]y treating unauthorized migrants as threats to national security, U.S. law enforcements agents have colluded in separating migrants as a distinct class of subjects, divested of normal protections and rights accorded to other members of society. Migrants are subject to punitive treatment in the custody of law enforcement that could be termed exceptional were it not so routine and *constitutive of the penal system...*” (my emphasis, 5). Here, the failure/recovery paradigm manifests itself outside of the rhetoric of “salvaging” or rescuing the Other from a state of ineptitude. Instead, recovery or aid is at the service of detention centers’ corporate interests. At the time the article was published in 2010, the Department of Homeland Security was responsible for more than 350 private and state-run prisons that housed more than 400,000 immigrants in ICE custody.<sup>15</sup> Today, private prison companies are a \$70 billion a year profit. To think of the ways failure serves a purposeful role in regulating citizenship is to trace the ways in which people in need are denied refugee status in order to legitimize the corporatization of an expanding penal system.

The historical criminalization of people of color in the United States has always revolved around concerns with citizenship. As Lisa Cacho states in *Social Death*, “In the United States,

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<sup>15</sup> Schmidt-Camacho, 7

rights, freedom, and property are intertwined, and this interconnection determines one's eligibility for personhood" (24). Thus, the institution of a system of law and order that operated outside of overtly racist terms in the mid-twentieth century reveals how the legitimization of the law as morally and ethically just redefined our claims to social value. What was once an irreducible human right becomes a question of whether or not someone is morally deserving or undeserving of keeping that right, ultimately jeopardizing, as Cacho states, "one's eligibility for personhood." Accordingly, I'd like to consider how the rise of mass incarceration in the U.S. and the management of immigrant communities is the work of coloniality introducing new modes of domination, as well as targeting and classifying minoritized populations as culturally inferior and thus criminal. Michelle Alexander's celebrated book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, exposes the history and developing apparatuses of mass incarceration as they relate to a U.S. racial caste system. In her critique of the Jim Crow system as a form of social control, Alexander contends that the political response to the civil rights movements of the 60s was undeniably dependent on the socioeconomic anxieties of white elites. She claims that the 'law and order' southern strategy developed in the 1960s culminated in Richard Nixon's successful 1968 presidential campaign. For example, in a Nixon television campaign advert, the voiceover narrated, "[I]t is time for an honest look at the problem of order in the United States. Dissent is a necessary ingredient of change, but in a system of government that provides for peaceful change, there is no cause that justifies resort to violence..." to which Nixon reportedly remarked, "hits it right on the nose. It's all about those damn Negro-Puerto Rican groups out there" (46-47). Nixon's coded racial language that defined the Civil Rights movements and people of color as "criminals" politically disoriented and animated sections of poor white workers around the rich elite. There was not only a racialized understanding of how criminality

and social disruption were linked, but also an unquestioned allegiance to law and order as it legitimized itself in the face of social unrest by bridging the gap between poor and rich whites.

In the chapter titled, “The Rebirth of Caste,” Alexander notes that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “two schools of thought were offered to the general public regarding race, poverty, and the social order. Conservatives argued that poverty was caused not by structural factors related to race and class but rather by culture – particularly black culture... The “social pathologies” of the poor, particularly street crime, illegal drug use, and delinquency, were redefined by conservatives as having their cause in overly generous relief arrangements” (45). While “Liberals, by contrast, insisted that social reforms such as the War on Poverty and civil rights legislation would get at the “root causes” of criminal behavior and stressed the social conditions that predictably generate crime” (45). The argument illustrates that both race and poverty are inherently dependent on one another, and that competing discourses on poverty were centered on a politics of meritocracy. For both political parties, social value and reform could be assigned or denied on race-neutral accusations that were disguised as claims to morality. When conservatives indicated that culture, rather than race and class, was the root cause of poverty, blackness became misrecognized as pathological and inherently criminalized. To be identified as black was to be always already excluded from living a law-abiding, moral life. What was at stake in delineating whether or not poor people of color are a deserving social group was that they were already seen as predisposed to “criminal behavior” and thus targets of punitive measures and social containment.

While much of Alexander’s book focuses on southern black racism, the relationship between racial discrimination and criminality develops nationwide across various racial groups. I am not trying to conflate the histories and experiences of racism in the United States by different

marginalized groups, but rather to think of systematic ways coloniality structures domination. In particular, I'd like to focus on the 1969 case of Los Siete de la Raza in San Francisco, CA. This particular event, I argue, not only transformed the civil rights movements of the Bay Area and their sociopolitical goals, but also helped initiate a shift and movement towards a complex understanding of U.S. Latino/a/x identity. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1969, two police officers dressed in plain clothing arrived to the home of an 18-year-old boy named José Bios. Bios and several friends who lived in the Mission District were transferring a TV into 429-433 Alvarado Street when Officers Brodnick and McGoran stopped and questioned them. A scuffle broke out and shots were fired. A few moments later, Officer Brodnick was dead, fatally shot by McGoran's gun, while McGoran lay injured. Although the young Latino men ran away, a week later 6 of the 7 accused were arrested and charged with murder. The ensuing trial would expose the overreaching effects of police brutality in the Mission district and the ways in which law and order excluded legally vulnerable populations from justice. Similar to the experiences of police brutality that Michelle Alexander explores in the *New Jim Crow*, other racialized groups across the U.S. were also targets of unfair disciplining measures that removed them from the processes of legitimization that denote social value. Yet, at the same time that governing systems of power delegitimized marginalized social groups, the case of Los Siete inspired activists and artists alike to rethink measures of resistance, cultivating cross-racial collaborations that offered a new way of imagining solidarity.

The polarizing accounts that developed regarding the death of police officer Joe Brodnick on May 1, 1969 in San Francisco, CA became part of a larger civil rights historical narrative. Before any investigations began, newspapers and other mass media outlets, as well as the Mayor and San Francisco's police force, had already accused and convicted seven young Latino men of

Brodnick's murder. The commonplace perception, it was argued, was that this heinous crime was committed by lawbreakers against a just and dignified system of law; that is, a gang of young brown thieves attacked two brave and "idealistic" cops, killing one and injuring the other. The resulting social response was that the seven men deserved the death penalty. However, because the story behind the events leading to Brodnick's death were largely unknown and because many people of color in San Francisco, CA had either witnessed or been victimized by police brutality, a small but growing number of people denied the one-sided narrative that circulated the mainstream media. The cross-racial coalitions that formed leading to defense of Los Siete both exposed the unjust system that criminalized black and brown bodies on a daily basis and helped developed a unique politics of identity in the Bay Area. The story of Los Siete de la Raza (the Seven of the Race), as it became known, welcomed a new consciousness that both engaged with larger political movements and departed from them.

Many people in San Francisco's largely Latino/a/x Mission district knew the seven young men. They were described in locally produced newspapers "as students at the College of San Mateo, as organizers for its outstanding "College Readiness Program," and as "brothers on the block" who had decided to go back to school to develop the skills to serve their people" (Basta Ya!, 1969). While Los Siete had personally convinced dozens of Latino/a/x street youths to attend college, mainstream media sources were not invested in publishing the young men's community building work. Instead, newspapers represented Los Siete as deviant criminals while the police officers were narrated as peacekeepers, effectively denying any implications that the law itself might have been at fault. The atmosphere of presumed guilt and denial of Los Siete's moral character condemned the young men on the basis of circumstantial or irrelevant evidence. They were always already guilty based on their statuses as young Latino men from the mission

district of San Francisco, CA. For example, according to Basta Ya!, “[T]he *San Francisco Chronicle*'s coverage of Los Siete actually began one week before Joe Brodnick's death. A front page story on April 24, 1969, described "A Gang's Terror in the Mission" -- "A loose-knit gang of idlers and Mission District neighborhood hoodlums are slowly closing a fist of fear around the business life of a once bustling Mission District neighborhood..." (20). The Mission was not only narrated as a space of terror festering with crime, but also as a space where crime was responsible for the lack of economic development instead of the other way around. The story reworked the conditions that lead to rampant crime and simultaneously accused Mission residences of stifling economic flow; the racialized inhabitants were a threat to both democratic and capitalistic values. As a result, the city increased police presence in the Mission a week before Brodnick died in order to force young people off the streets and manage their movement. Attention now shifted away from discerning what really happened on May 1<sup>st</sup> and instead focused on reproducing narratives that catered to fears of deviancy and hypercriminalized the Mission. While many political officials and journalists were concerned with the accounts leading to Brodnick's death, I argue that rethinking the ambiguous details of the event allows us to witness injustice and state abuse as processes that are invested in domination and exploitation. We are able to not only acknowledge a move beyond the written, but also to question how and why the writing and “not writing,” the saying and the not saying take place.

Before I move on to the final section of this chapter, I'd like to consider a relevant and dangerous example of how the coloniality of power informs the failure/recovery paradigm today. In September 2017, the island of Puerto Rico was decimated by two consecutive hurricanes. Agricultural industries and towns were left inundated and most of the Island lost electrical power as well as access to basic survival supplies like clean water. When news broke out about the



devastating conditions people were living in Puerto Rico, President Donald Trump tweeted, “Texas & Florida are doing great but Puerto Rico, which was already suffering from broken infrastructure & massive debt, is in deep trouble.../ ...It's old electrical grid, which was in terrible shape, was devastated. Much of the Island was destroyed, with billions of dollars.../ ...owed to Wall Street and the banks which, sadly, must be dealt with. Food, water and medical are top priorities - and doing well. #FEMA” (@trump). Before offering humanitarian aid or empathy to American citizens left marooned by a natural disaster, the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States underlined the Island’s “infrastructure and massive debt,” implying that the economic conditions of Puerto Rico aided in its destruction and threatens any plans of repayment to “Wall street and the banks” while simultaneously foreclosing any claims to future loans. Ultimately, what Trump suggests and what I insinuate is at work in U.S. Empire making, is that the logic of coloniality frames the failure/recovery paradigm as one of cultural or financial debt and investment. It is not enough that racialized groups of people from Latin America and the Caribbean are deemed inferior or incapable of self-development and in need of rescuing, but it is also necessary, before distributing aid or conferring citizenship, that the nation state first incur dominance vis-à-vis a networked and institutionalized control of populations.

I turn to the historical moments before, during, and after the civil wars in Central America to highlight how the failure/recovery paradigm creates the conditions that generate missing bodies. In Colby’s study of Jim Crow practices in Guatemala, black subjects fled the violence they experienced by escaping and disappearing into the country’s inland. And while Vagrancy laws in Guatemala criminalized bodies in dissent at the turn of the century, the governing forces at odds with Central American rebels during the socialist revolutions of the 1970s endorsed genocidal warfare that effectively forced disappearances or demolished

communities of land workers. In response to the millions of people attempting to escape such brutal violence, U.S. immigration enforcement laws and institutions deferred legal aid, fostering instead a regime of exclusion and punishment that renders the undocumented legally unrecognizable and removed from personhood. Consequently, the unrecognized status of the undocumented renders the subject vulnerable to both violent discourses and processes of dehumanization that impact his/her precarious journey to the U.S.

### **Unbeing and Unbecoming in U.S. Central American Writing**

While I have argued that failure is a discursive tool wielded by governments and their institutions for the reproduction of dominance, I'd like to now consider how literature and the imaginative play of academic thinkers offer alternatives to conventional understandings of progress and failure. In J.J. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, failure is a concept that interrupts narratives of success and engenders unorthodox ways of knowing and being. She argues, "failure allows us to escape the *punishing norms* that discipline behavior and *manage human development* with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods... And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (my emphasis, 3). As an archive of antidisiplinary thinking, *The Queer Art of Failure* uses low theory and popular knowledge to disrupt the beliefs that success and "toxic positivity" emerge out of the individual's will, attitude, and capacity to triumph rather than the structural and social conditions that allow some to flourish and others to fail. Whereas those that embrace "a host of negative affects" use the experiences of failure to challenge the conditions of inequality and injustice that inform their lives. They begin to make sense of their lives outside of traditional

measures of happiness or understandings of capitalist driven norms like “winning.” Failure is about losing and moving outside of a social order that “manages human development” in order to emancipate the subject from the forces that have defined its being; that is, as Halberstam claims, “failure is also unbeing, and... these modes of unbeing and unbecoming propose a different relation to knowledge” (23).

Unfortunately, success stories structure the larger and most accessible narratives about Central American migrants. In the 2006 edition of the American bestselling book, *Enrique’s Journey*, author Sonia Nazario’s prologue details the extraordinary research she embarked on to gather first hand information about a young man named Enrique and his migrant journey from Honduras to the U.S. She claims to have traveled throughout migrant routes in Mexico, retracing Enrique’s steps and witnessing the violent conditions of the journey North. With each move towards the U.S., she realizes that the most vulnerable people, women and children, often possess the most determination throughout the dangerous trek. Yet, at the conclusion of the prologue, she offers a piece of advice: “[F]or Latina mothers coming to the United States, my hope is that they will understand the full consequences of leaving their children behind and make better-informed decisions. For in the end, these separations almost always end badly” (xxv). This generalizing statement borrows on the logic of respectability that repositions the woman as sole caretaker of the children. Women’s desires and actions take meaning only in relation to a heterosexual framework of familial relations. Absent from the statement is the implication that migrant women often flee the home because they have no choice. Nazario’s suggestion is a way of re-orienting the role of women and their failure to be present mothers in order to accommodate moralistic understandings of devotion that inform liberal ideas of motherhood.

Conversely, issues of unbeing and unbecoming inform the various stories and poems present in *The Wandering Song* anthology. For the “Children of the Diaspora,” as Guatemalan-American writer Maya Chinchilla terms the children of Central American exiles in the U.S., writing about their bicultural identity is also about narrating an experience of unbecoming since Central Americans born in diaspora did not live through civil war but still suffer its consequences. For example, the poem, “Poder,” by Darrel Alejandro Holnes can be read as a dedication, a prayer offered up “for the surge of 70,000 Central American migrant kids,” as the subtitle states. He claims, “I write to the mothers who send/ their children north/ never knowing if they’ll make it/ but hoping that even if they don’t/ their creations might mean more than just/ the flesh and bone with which they’re made/ because they moved, because they desired (62). Holnes choice to write about the death or disappearance of children as a “hope” that their “creations might mean more than just/ the flesh and bone with which they’re made” places the mother’s role as nurturer and life-provider in radical opposition to the role of motherhood offered by Nazario. By situating the hope that the children might mean more “because they moved, because they desired,” life does not simply mean surviving the violence of the journey, but rather signifies the desire to be or belong otherwise even in absence. Holnes does not shy away from embracing the “never knowing if they’ll make it” reality of migrant children’s journey North. Instead, he refuses the liberal rhetoric of choice that condemns and dehumanizes mothers of migrant children. The quasi-prayer poem form is Holnes’ way of pledging allegiance to the mothers who are willing to experience loss because they aspire to a better world for their children.

Lorena Duarte painfully narrates the overwhelming experience of losing a child because s/he is missing in the form of an imaginative prayer in “San Nicolas, Patron Saint of Children.”

She begins by imagining a mother, her 5<sup>th</sup> client of an unknown job, praying and asking Saint Nicholas for the safe return of her daughter. Amidst the images of “files” and clothing, allusions to a “war” that separated both, Duarte describes a panicked desire that is fulfilled in a reunion of mother and daughter only to be promptly shattered by the daughter’s deportation. She writes, “I could./ A few months later/ Only imagined what happened/ When the daughter was sent back/ Details were not known./ We only heard through the friend of a friend of a friend./... I cannot imagine how your heart continues when/ It beats thousands of miles away./ I could and can only imagine/ I never saw her again” (106). The ambiguous references to place and time: the narrator’s unknown job which we can only assume is a search agency and a mother looking for a daughter “[N]ot seen for more than half her life,” mirror the disorienting nature of searching for migrant loved ones who have been separated or lost. Thus, the narrator can only imagine as a way of knowing and empathizing, but even imagining has its limitations as the narrator claims, “I cannot imagine how your heart continues when/ It beats thousands of miles away.” This prayer is about searching for lost origins and relationships that are always out of reach, always a ritualized performance of hope and longing because we, according to Duarte, “pontificate about borders” (105). That the prayer-poem ends in despair and comments on the unknown future of the mother illustrates that loss and never-knowing are the conditions created by the political violence of borders and immigration laws. The witnessing subject can thus only surrender to a ritualized desire of imagining that is never fulfilled, appearing incomprehensible and aimless but simultaneously allowing the witness to expose the systems of subjugation that sever familial bonds.

Prayers of supplication are a common symbol and form of expression across many of the poems and personal collections in the anthology. They emphasize the feelings of despair and

incertitude that surface after having lost someone to violence, undermining the principles of “positivity” that inform the foundational rights invoked in the Declaration of Independence: for migrants, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are not sacred and undeniable rights. Prayer then becomes a medium of articulation to search, request, or demand meaning for lives that have been rendered meaningless; but, more often than not, the supplications for the return of family members fall flat, as in Lorna’s poem, never arriving or becoming concrete realities precisely because colonial violence has removed the possibilities of return. To perform a ritualized re-calling of a lost loved one is to establish new ways of remembering in which the traces of the absence create new and different forms of relationality. The witness “can only imagine” but also cannot imagine and within this uneasy contradiction is able to participate in the woman’s prayer of supplication.

To consider an alternative understanding of loss, in Christina Enriquez’s short fiction, “Everything is Far From Here,” the mother in search of her son is being held captive in a detention center. Morning after morning, people assure her in different ways that her son will eventually return to her. Some people tell her to search in the family unit of the center; others claim to have seen him on the migrant trails. Only the bureaucratic bodies in charge of processing her and other migrants don’t offer sympathy. In fact, when she tells a lawyer she fled her home country because young men raped her and she was afraid of further violence, he tells her “boys will be boys.” Finally, in a manner reminiscent of the hysteria summoned in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Enriquez writes, “Often now, she wants to scream. Sometimes she does, and then the guards come to restrain her... They drag her down the hall and put her in a room, a colorless box with spiders in the corners, until she calms down. But that’s going in the wrong direction. The scream is for help, not for hindrance. Why don’t they understand? The woman in the box

next to hers is there because she threw up. To throw up is to disobey orders. You disobey, you get the box. The guards think: The smaller the box, the more we can control them. But everyone else knows: The smaller the box, the more out of control people become” (153). The humility attributed to prayer is lost in the scream of despair and hysteria. The woman who is in search of her son can only supplicate with the law enforcement officers who do not empathize and instead restrain her by placing her in a small box. The painful scream and ensuing punishment are dissonant images that highlight the inhumane ordering and management of people who have been rendered disposable.

Alongside the experience of bearing witness to mothers in search of their lost children, U.S. Central Americans also narrate a contentious relationship to inaccessible histories and memories. In “When Mama Told Me” and “Resistance Footage,” Gabriela Ramirez-Chavez narrates the first time she heard about and saw a disappearance. The first story, “When Mama Told Me,” is about her inability to imagine “how someone could just be somewhere and then poof away” (134). In trying to make sense of what disappearances signify or even look like, she associates shameful behavior with the disappearance of her tio: “[O]r maybe it was like when I felt so small I wanted to disappear. Like when Ms. H asked me what Mama does for a living and I told her I didn’t know... I didn’t want to say, ‘My mom cleans houses, big houses, not like the one-bedroom we share, where Papi was *this* close to being hurt by the *cholos*. She scrubs bathrooms and toilets on her knees, like a holy prayer, not like the other moms that stay home.’” (134). The story establishes a contradictory mood: whereas Ramirez-Chavez is remembering a traumatic childhood memory in which she disowns her mother out of shame, it is also told in relationship to the story of her forcibly disappeared uncle. In doing so, the author undermines the romantic tendency to rely on memories as ways of knowing the past. In both the memory of

shame and the inaccessible memory of her uncle, Ramirez-Chavez underlies the inability to repress trauma. The mother's experience of guilt, implied in the statement, "Mama would say... how good I have it because I wasn't born in that time," is also connected to the child's experience of shame.

"Resistance Footage" is also about the relationship between contradictory images of violence. Written in two paragraphs, the first one describes the narrator's experience of watching a documentary about an unknown man's violent kidnapping, while the second paragraph reverts the order of events. She writes, "I move the cursor over the video player, drag the white dot across the screen, to watch it all go backwards. Three figures help an injured young man lying face-down on the dirt... One clutches the man's arm and pushes it back into place. Together they struggle to pull him up, each relying on the other for support" (135). The simple act of rewinding the video inverts the details of the horrific abduction, illustrating instead a visualization of help that reclaims the missing. But such an ideal depiction of life-affirming kindness can only manifest through the act of retracing video footage. Retracing, or rewinding, becomes a performative act of forgetting in which kindness exists only as an ephemeral loop that is constantly undone by the forward motion of the video. The absent body is always experienced as a momentary flash, made or undone by his relation to the video's temporality.

Because U.S. Central American writers often attempt to make sense of a loss or absence they have never experienced yet know, they must also grapple with the impossibility of rescuing or reclaiming the lost stories that inform their lives. Becoming is thus intimately connected to failure. According to Ana Patricia Rodriguez, "many children of the Central American diaspora who came to the United States at an early age, or who were born here, their knowledge of the *homelands* is oftentimes a *second-hand* one, mediated by the stories, memories, and texts



transmitted to them by others” (Rodriguez, 2). I argue that in the transmission of mediated, second-hand stories of belonging, Central American-Americans are free to record their identities as refusals to belong or become anything at all. Unbeing and unbelonging are ways of existing that mirror the fluid, identities-in-form of diasporic subjects. For example, Quique Aviles’ poem, “Latinhood,” navigates the various tropes associated with Latino/a/x identity in search of his own identity. He begins with a set of interrogative statements: “what does it feel like inside?/ what color is this latinhood? how does it do what it does?... what language does it speak?/ cachtiqel/ Spanish/ nahuatl/ creole/ or english?” (141), only to interrupt the claims to racial descriptors with the same question, “what does it feel like inside?” (143). The inside that Aviles searches for is removed from the colonial order of race and languages. By repeating “what does it feel like inside?,” he refuses the categories of belonging that introduced a social order based on domination and imposed a hierarchical understanding of difference. At the end, he states, “is it true what they are saying?/ that this whole thing/ is the simple ability/ to swallow the world at birth/ keeping it/ learning to chew at it/ letting it grow/ letting it grow inside” (143). Rather than nostalgically claiming a lost origin, Aviles surrenders to a form of unbeing that is ever expanding with no beginning or end. Written in the present participle, “learning” and “letting” suggest that the identity of the U.S. Central American is always in process, sustained by “swallowing the world at birth.”

Conversely, Maya Chinchilla’s poem, “What It’s like to Be a Central American Unicorn for Those Who Aren’t,” is about an unbecoming that embraces the various images and tropes representative of a Central Americanness in order to imagine an alternative sense of self. She writes, “[F]irst of all I am a mythical creature that is only mentioned/ if at all/ in relation to war, trauma, maras, revolutions, earthquakes,/ Indians kidnapped by aliens, and the Guatemalan maid

that never speaks/ but has her own story to tell./ What happens if I never mention these things?/ am I contributing to the loss/ the silence/ the gaps in historical memory/ the opportunity for reconciliation/ to make amends?” (162). In a similar fashion to Aviles, the rhetorical use of interrogative statements is also Chinchilla’s refusal to be defined by these particular colonial tropes. Indeed, she does not have a relationship to popular understandings of Central American culture because the very violence that produced “The Children of the Diaspora” precludes a return to a place that is always only “an imaginary homeland.” She claims, “[S]o I pack my Central American paranoia/ that taught me everyone is shady until proven otherwise,/ Mix in grains of sand from an imaginary homelands,/ file them in plastic file box and ride off to the next adventure/ leave a trail of glitter that smells of copal, banana leaves,/ wood burning stoves and moist green earth/ so that other magical creatures may find me” (163). If being Central American is always only in relation to the “mention” of violence and inaccessible returns, then being restless and moving with paranoia is refusing to adopt the language of the colonial systems (and tropes) that have created a dysfunctional Central America. To be a magical creature that leaves “a trail of glitter” that smells of earthly scents is to move outside the romanticized narratives of connection implied in the return to a homeland. Moreover, by refusing to “mention” what is popularly known about Central America, Chinchilla enacts an ubecoming that speaks outside of the site of colonial enunciation; it is not a mute voice or simply an act of resisting coloniality, but rather it is the site of a failure that re-produces new ways of being.

Failure is not a homogenous experience. It structures different patterns of abuse across different populations and marginalized groups. However, what I have attempted to articulate is that the discourse of failure and recovery in relationship to the coloniality of power naturalizes a social order based on domination and exploitation. While different methods are employed at

home and abroad, the U.S. Empire has a long history of managing subaltern populations in the service of capitalist interest. Yet, failure can become a mode of resistance for writers and subversive thinkers precisely because it shifts the processes of relationality away from domination and exploitation. When U.S. Central American writers confront the second-hand stories of violence and dispossession that inevitably influence their identities as U.S. Latino/as, unbeing and unbecoming become useful tools for the subversion of power. They are neither interested nor indebted to a project of recovery that would reclaim success stories or positivity narratives that inform U.S. American ideals of progress, but rather engage in an imaginative practice of world re-construction. In what follows, I explore the many ways institutions of representation like national archives and liberal human rights projects reframe “recovery” of missing bodies as a project of the state. At the same time, I turn to the literary and cultural work of Latino/a/x writers and thinkers who engage with irredeemable loss and absence as political projects engrossed with failure. In their efforts to conceptualize missing bodies, failure becomes a process that refuses to bury a history of violence and instead recenters the overbearing weight of oppression as always already present. Artists and activists define Central American identity through the active and impossible effort to “resurrect the dead”—whether from dismantled state archives or from the forensic identification of human remains. Recovery is not the return to a previous state of sociopolitical stability, but rather a way of making visible the material destruction of bodies in order to imagine possible futures.

## CHAPTER TWO

**Confessions of Impossibility: Reimagining Identity and the Archive of Postwar Guatemala**

As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a free state, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing.  
 - Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

Emblematic cases like Dos Erres should be known. But it's not the path or the route that Guatemala should follow. We Guatemalans should be able, on both sides, for the benefit, for the sake of the future generations, to find forgiveness and to look forward without stumbling upon the past at every moment.  
 - Otto Perez Molina

The opening statement by African-American scholar, Saidiya Hartman, and current Guatemalan president, Otto Perez Molina, highlight what's at stake in competing claims to "a history of the present."<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, Hartman's statement frames a futurity that is positioned at the site of a teleological break or rather interruption, simultaneously extending the past into the present and a historical present into an anticipated future. On the other hand, Perez Molina's claims to an imaginative future imply a certain transitionality that is divorced from the historical conditions that occasion it. Certainly, while both appeal for a collective understanding of history<sup>17</sup> as an epistemic hinge that either opens or closes a freed future, their shifting statements reveal that to claim historical memory is to control the frame and content of progress. Memory, they seem to suggest, becomes an alternative site of political exchange wherein a traumatic past must always be transacted and negotiated for the sake of moving forward. So if

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<sup>16</sup> Saidiya Hartman is a professor of African-American literature and history, and author of *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). Otto Perez Molina was both the director of Guatemala's military intelligence during the civil war and President of Guatemala from 2012-2015. In 2015, he was charged of customs corruption, stripped of immunity, and arrested. He is currently imprisoned at the Matamoros prison in Guatemala City.

<sup>17</sup> I'd like to acknowledge the disparate histories that inform both statements: Hartman's claim to a collective history is about the trans-Atlantic slave trade while Perez Molina's statement references the 1982 government-sanctioned massacre of an indigenous village in Guatemala called "Dos Erres."

such a struggle materializes at the moment of articulation, what can be said about the role of historical memory in literary texts that represent an inaccessible past? In other words, how is historical memory articulated in works that explicitly announce a certain sense of incompleteness and resistance to translate, as Hartman states, “our experience with the life of the dead”?

Such questions of historical representation animate the plot of two novels concerned with a post-civil war Guatemalan state. Both *When The Ground Turns in its Sleep* by Sylvia Sellers-Garcia and Horacio Castellano Moya’s *Insensatez (Senselessness)* grapple with the official historiography of Guatemala’s civil war and the unofficial testimonies of communities seeking restitution. Yet what drives the novels’ narratives is the notion that missing bodies (and testimonies about missing bodies) reveal a certain disconnection between accountability and reparation. Thus, while official documents such as the Historical Clarification Commission’s report, “Memory of Silence,” reveal quantified acts of violence - enumerating and codifying human rights violations as objective information - I suggest that Sellers-Garcia and Moya creatively reimagine the failure, or rather disconnection, that informs an archive of violence and its ability to present a conceivable framework of peace and social justice. In doing so, the novels offer an alternative look at the importance of documentation and historical memory, challenging the very models of progress and success that have undermined marginalized subjects and demanded a move into a peaceful future “without stumbling upon the past.”

It is important to note that while I am working with a comparative reading of *When the Ground Turns in its Sleep* and *Senselessness*, the novels and their respective histories differ from one another.<sup>18</sup> In Sellers-Garcia’s book, the protagonist, Nitido Aman, is a second-generation

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<sup>18</sup> Sylvia Sellers-Garcia is a Guatemalan-American writer and scholar born in the U.S. who teaches colonial Latin American History. Her research the history of documents, the period of Bourbon reforms in the eighteenth century, and the history of the empire. Horacio Castellanos Moya, conversely, is a

Guatemalan immigrant returning to his parent's native hometown disguised as a Catholic priest, while Moya's text introduces an unnamed anti-hero in charge of translating testimonies of violence for a fictionalized postwar Guatemalan government. My readings of both texts center upon the various forms of disconnections that influence how characters engage with the remnants of such a violent history. From the aforementioned generational and familial distances to the textual traces invoked to supplement a fragmented historiography, I argue that the novels do not work within the conceptual framework of remembering or forgetting, but rather invoke missing bodies to undo such a limiting binary. What is at stake in the battlefield of historical memory is not the disappearance of a collective memory, but rather the normalization of a dissociative state of mind that is unable to identify state sanctioned violence as a practice deeply embedded in a long history of power relations.<sup>19</sup> By departing from the traditional narrative of recovery, Sellers-Garcia and Moya expose how the Guatemalan civil war and the emergent discourse of failed political reform are indebted to a complex history of subjugation, neocolonial projects of exploitation, and premised upon the exclusionary logic of foreign policy.

While there exists an emphasis on the dissociative conditions that inform post-war Guatemalan identity and belonging, the novels also materialize their own limitations. They each downplay their own determining and authoritative role in advancing justice and preserving memory by acknowledging their own inconsistencies. For Nitido Aman in *When the Ground...*,

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Salvadoran creative writer and journalist who self-exiled to Costa Rica and Mexico during the Salvadoran civil war and currently teaches in the U.S.

<sup>19</sup> See Lovell, W. George. *Conquest and Survival In Colonial Guatemala : a Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500-1821*. Fourth edition. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015; Thompson, Antonio S, and Christos G Frenzos. *The Routledge Handbook of American Military and Diplomatic History, 1865 to the Present*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013; Grow, Michael. *U.s. Presidents and Latin American Interventions : Pursuing Regime Change In the Cold War*. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2008.

the space of the text serves as a confessional wherein he may declare the lies and secrets that frame his transcription of events. While Moya's protagonist's stream-of-consciousness performance is likewise revealing, providing a critical gaze at translation that not only discloses the characters own cynical suspicions but also illustrates how history as well as fiction is a mediated construct. Yet, as I will argue, such explicit inconsistencies become functional literary techniques that are indispensable to understanding how literature may function as an alternative archive of sorts. Indeed, by employing the style of a confessional narrative, both texts reveal an inability to suppress any contradictions inherent when confronting the past; they dramatize a critical self-awareness of their own construction.

The texts, moreover, uphold a cynical and infringing relationship to the truth, refusing to adhere to authenticating forms of knowledge production. They are novels that continuously veer in form and content, and it is such a veering that engenders its political force. In other words, they remove themselves from the service of a particular institution – like the truth commission – and present narratives that preserve difference in an ostentatious and problematic manner, refuting the notion that to relate a (hi)story fraught with political violence is to present an intact and observable truth. This indeterminate relationship to a quantifiable truth is precisely what forces readers to question not only the status of a postwar archive, but also the use of its content. For, in a manner that is unapologetic in style, the novels show what the uneasy relations are to the Archive that informs the progress of a postwar Guatemalan state.

Thus, I read the novels as both approaching and departing from key theoretical models that have been highly praised in Subaltern studies. Because *When the Ground...* and *Senselessness* introduce unedited excerpts of real documents and testimonies into their fictional stories, critical discussions have been unable to uniformly characterize the genres at work in the

texts or to accurately assess how the texts relate to a tradition such as *testimonio*.<sup>20</sup>

Unsurprisingly, many of the formal and thematic inconsistencies I have alluded to in this section have been overlooked by critics and subsumed under the restrictive label of failure that has long categorized a Central American imaginary. In particular, *Senselessness* has been read as being symptomatic of the violence that still consumes a postwar Guatemala; veiled by the guise of failure and framed as an “aesthetic of cynicism,” Moya’s text has not been given the critical attention it deserves.<sup>21</sup>

In this chapter, I will discuss how official projects of recovery such as the human rights violations report, “Memory of Silence,” and the case of Dos Erres reveal the political tensions inherent in claims to historical narratives. Then, I will offer close-readings of El Museo de los Mártires in Guatemala City, *When the Ground...* and *Senselessness*, delineating how an engagement with stories of missing people exposes a dissociative understanding of a history of subjugation and the dangers that develop out of such a state. Contradictions, disassociations, and mistranslations at the formal and informal level of the texts work multifold: first, they work outside the conventional frameworks of remembering versus forgetting; secondly, they reveal an inconsistent and complicated relationship to the truth; and thirdly, they engage in a parodic performance of archiving. Furthermore, because a saturating sense of incompleteness drives the novels, I read these particular forms of narrative failures to suggest not a defeatist understanding of political redress nor a pathologizing critique of the late twentieth century Central American condition, but rather to argue that the texts’ ability to represent indeterminacy is strategically

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<sup>20</sup> This statement is in regards to *Senselessness*. At the moment, there is no criticism of *testimonio* available for *When the Ground Turns in its Sleep*.

<sup>21</sup> Cortez, Beatriz. *Estética del cinismo. Pasión y desencanto en la literatura centroamericana de posguerra*: F&G Editores, 2010, Print.



functional. Failure frames a space of contingency that is continuously undoing frames of references, revealing that a discursive practice of resistance is always in process. I examine the novels' failed engagement with a historical present as a way of both reinvigorating the call for social justice and challenging the act of testimony as a model for reading the other.

### **Constructing Spaces of Memory**

The emergence of resistant movements that catalyzed the 1960 Guatemalan civil war began during the agrarian reforms of 1952.<sup>22</sup> Jacobo Árbenz's project of modernization that entailed expropriating uncultivated land from large landholdings and redistributing it to poor laborers.<sup>23</sup> The reform was part of a decade long period of democratization that began in 1944 and extended economic and political rights to rural peasants. However, of the 1.7 million acres of uncultivated land expropriated by the Árbenz government from 1952-1954, over 400,000 acres belonged to the United Fruit Company. The confiscation of land by the Guatemalan government led to a series of retaliations from elite plantation owners, UFC, and the United States government that culminated in a 1954 coup d'état. The coup that displaced Árbenz was initiated and disguised by the U.S. military as an intervention against the spread of communism in Central America. Yet, the social mobilization of Guatemala's rural class had gained momentum during the last ten years and, according to Greg Grandin in *War by Other Means*, "[L]and reform, both its application and its revocation in 1954, shaped the ways many rural communities experienced the ensuing civil war. In the 1970s many of the peasant leagues that united to form the Comité de Unidad Campesina- the CUC... could trace their roots back to the 1944-1954 period, and the

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<sup>22</sup> See Handy, Jim. *Revolution in the Countryside: Rural Conflict and Agrarian Reform in Guatemala, 1944–1954*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994; Grandin, Greg, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> See Douglas W. Trefzger, "Guatemala's 1952 Agrarian Reform Law: A Critical Reassessment," *International Social Science Review*, March 2002.

CUC grew strong in communities that witnessed high levels of mobilization during the land reform...” (65). The CUC would formally begin in 1978 as an organization dedicated to the advancement of structural changes from fair labor wages to anti-discriminatory housing policies. But, as the onslaught of military repression intensified in the 1980s, Guatemala’s rural communities and the CUC rapidly transitioned from a demonstrative and ideological organization of social justice into a rebellion immersed in the armed struggle.

The mobilization of over 200 communities that ultimately became the CUC was made possible by the rise of a global economy that saw the collapse of the Central American Common Market in 1969 and shifted the socioeconomic experiences of diverse population sectors.<sup>24</sup> Peasant collectives, industrial unions, and liberation theology practices polarized the political forces of the country into a rapidly growing insurgency and a repressive counterrevolutionary state. Unlike former periods of state repression in which an exclusionary sense of nationalism instigated racial divides between ladino working classes and rural Mayan populations, foreign intervention in the civil war escalated the destabilization of a Guatemalan national identity. As counterinsurgent military support from the U.S. increased, the Guatemalan government responded to internal turmoil with military tactics that would launch the country into an unforgiveable genocidal warfare against Mayan populations. To be sure, although village massacres had been an ongoing war reality since 1960, the most intensive phase of counterinsurgent repression occurred during Efraín Ríos Montt’s rise to power from 1981-1983.<sup>25</sup> As a military general in 1981, Ríos-Montt led a Scorched Earth campaign that claimed

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<sup>24</sup> See Booth, John A. "Global Forces and Regime Change: Guatemala in the Central American Context." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 42.4 (2000): V. Web.

<sup>25</sup> For a complete list of massacres and their locations, see Mark K. Steinberg, Carrie Height, Rosemary Mosher and Matthew Bampton. "'Mapping massacres: GIS and state terror in Guatemala" *Geoforum* Vol. 37 Iss. 1 (2006)

the lives of over 1,700 Mayan Ixil. Then, when a military coup ousted General Romeo Lucas Garcia in 1982, a military junta took power and placed Rios-Montt as the country's leader of defense. He launched a military raid known as Plan Victoria 82 in which nearly 600 indigenous villages were razed and over 10,000 people were disappeared or murdered. The intensity and frequency of these clandestine massacres were not only successful in displacing an organized rebellion, but also solidified a legacy of terror that still plagues postwar Guatemala. In the systematic annihilation of Indigenous and peasant populations, the country saw its marginalized communities disappear from historical memory. When formal peace accords were finally signed in the early 1990s, Guatemala was left with the daunting task of having to reconstruct the fragments of its violent history.

The state sanctioned massacre of rural villages during the civil war remained a contested fact until the 1994 Historical Clarification Commission pursued formal investigations. However, according to the Charter established as investigating guidelines for the truth commission, one of the commission's purposes was not to "attribute responsibility to any individual in its work, recommendations and report nor shall these have any judicial aim or effect" (usip.org). They were instead acting as archivists, collecting objective evidence of violence and first-hand accounts of grievances. The political claims to the report and, consequently, to the testimonies that informed it would belong to a larger judicial imaginary in charge of interpreting what was legally important. As the title, "Historical Clarification Commission," suggests, part of the process involved in peace negotiations was a rendering of history that was complete and readily accessible. Indeed, in the larger scheme of events that would take "measures to preserve the memory of its victims, to foster a culture of mutual respect and observance of human rights and to strengthen the democratic process," the report had to act not only as a symbolic path that led

towards a restorative future, but also as a form of reparation, memorializing “the memory of its victims” as a form of justice in itself. And yet, one must ask whose “memory” is being preserved? The memory of the dead subject or those who suffered the consequences of the war? And how does acknowledging or preserving “the memory of its victims” inform accountability?

To pay particular attention to the language invoked by investigatory practices is to question the particular ways in which empirically based reports frame justice and articulate an epistemology of truth. As Margaret Popkin and Naomi Roht-Arriaza state in their examination of Latin American truth commissions, it is also to underscore how the truth commission model may veer, rather ironically, towards a teleological analysis of justice, becoming “so well known that it runs the danger of being perceived as something of a panacea rather than as one of a panoply of measures needed to undertake the complex process of coming to term with the past” (80). Thus, my focus on the Historical Clarification’s report, “Guatemala: Memory of Silence,” is to identify and grapple with the discursive (re)presentations that mark the production of an exclusive official historiography. I read the performative play of the report as a way to contain both time and voices by inscribing itself as a legitimate archive silencing any historical revisions of Guatemala’s civil war and by staging a national narrative that is always already indebted to a colonial historical record.

“Memory of Silence” functions as an act of memorialization, but one whose concern with truth and memory is tarnished by its performance of and adherence to state authority. The report is animated by a series of framing gestures that attempt to negotiate an assembly of contradictory information. From the opening Prologue to the Annexes that concludes the report’s investigation with a series of illustrated maps ranging from Presidential charts to maps of massacres, “memory of silence” resorts to its textual apparatuses to script what it cannot state in its formal conclusions

and recommendations. In fact, the opening sentence of the prologue claims, “Guatemala is a country of contrasts and contradictions” (11). By allowing such a statement to both frame and open the report, the truth commission addresses a difficult project, one who will attempt to strike an uneasy balance between the country’s geopolitical contrasts and contradictions without undermining its call for an “authentic democracy” (12). And yet it is such a claim to an “authentic democracy” that shifts the voices and, subsequently, the “memory of victims” to the margins of the document. As the Prologue announces an attempt to “clarify the history of the events of more than three decades of fratricidal war,” the language of patriarchal kinship dismisses both who and what is at fault, and who and what is in need of reparation. For example, the report states

[T]he authors of the Accord of Oslo believed that, despite the shock the Nation could suffer upon seeing itself reflected in the mirror of its past, it was nevertheless necessary to know the truth and make it public. It was their hope that truth would lead to reconciliation, and furthermore, that coming to terms with the truth is the only way to achieve this objective” (12).

The language not only legitimizes the authors’ work through the insertion of another authorial voice, “the authors of the Accord of Oslo”, but also establishes a certain accessibility to an authoritative truth by signaling “the Nation.” Here, the Nation is a separate entity suffering its own unique victimization as it gazes into a “mirror of its past.” The space of suffering is expressed as the gender-neutral political body that stands both outside of its past and unaware of its own truth. Indeed, the report, as a document that constructs an appeal for reconciliation and accountability, fails to function as a rhetorical fulcrum of sorts, since, beyond the call for national peace, the authors also do not mention or present a transcript of the “thousands of

testimonies” gathered. In fact, preceding the Prologue, resides an untitled page containing a series of quotes by Guatemalan authors, the bible, and an anonymous “testimony” requesting a pedagogical turn towards history. If the report’s function is to remember the victims, its rhetoric ironically marks a figurative and literal textual border, placing the voices of its victims at the margins of its context and Guatemala’s official historiography.

In contrast to “Memory of Silence,” Ricardo Falla’s scholarly report on the massacre of Finca San Francisco, Nenton, Guatemala, titled, “*Negreaba de zopilotes*,” illustrates what Kirsten Weld reviews as Falla’s resistance to “shy away from the contradictions in his witnesses’ memories, the ways in which local memories of what has transpired have changed over time, or the role of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor in the escalation of tensions leading up to the massacre” (180).<sup>26</sup> While both texts purport to be acts of remembering, the creative structure of Falla’s text develops out of a deep and personal connection to those massacred at San Francisco and the dispersed community that survived. Most importantly, however, the text engages with a thematic and structural journey between Falla’s 1982 account of the massacre and his present review of the events, demonstrating how the past cannot be divorced from a historical present. In his introduction, Falla states

Pero al adentrarme de nuevo en las entrevistas grabadas de 1982 con el fin de retocar solamente el manuscrito de entonces, fui quedando atrapado por la pregunta del presente. Y donde están estos testigos? Donde quedaron los sobrevivientes? Murieron todos? Se acabo San Francisco? Así llevo gritando – “se acabo San Francisco!” – unos de los testigos a la comunidad vecina de Yulaurel al día siguiente de la masacre. Entonces el

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<sup>26</sup> Weld, Kirsten. Writing Political Violence Into History. N.p.: Latin American Research Review, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2013. Web. <[https://lasa.international.pitt.edu/LARR/prot/fulltext/vol48no2/48-2\\_175-183\\_weld.pdf](https://lasa.international.pitt.edu/LARR/prot/fulltext/vol48no2/48-2_175-183_weld.pdf)>.

pasado me fue trayendo al presente. Los visite varias veces, tanto en México como en Guatemala. Se conmovieron al escuchar las entrevistas de los testigos de antes y añadieron datos y datos. Hicieron historia... (x)<sup>27</sup>

The linguistic play that opens this statement is emblematic of the insight Falla obtains in his expedition across geographical spaces and within his own archive of interviews. Like the reflexive statement “al adentrarme de nuevo” exemplifies, Falla’s move into the archive is also a move into the present, a present that is an extension of its past. And it is also a particular kind of encounter with the limits of an archive, expressing a series of questions that move beyond the contents of his archive. Moreover, the statement concludes by shifting into the collective’s construction of history, “hicieron historia,” reiterating Falla’s desire to both reclaim a community of victims and to declare that history is still in progress.

*Negreaba de zopilotes* does not simply introduce first hand testimonial accounts of the postwar San Franciscan community, but also strategically attempts to contextualize the fragmentary events that led to the 1982 massacre. Formally titled, “*Negreaba de zopilotes... Masacre y sobrevivencia: finca San Francisco Nenton, Guatemala (1871 a 2010)*,” the text’s historical expedition begins with the 1871 political reallocation of indigenous land, la Reforma Liberal de 1871. However, in its attempt to record a comprehensive overview of history, the author is aware of his own limitations, producing an historical timeline that departs from both a linear chronology and an empirical systemization of events. In fact, Falla announces in Part Two how such an engagement with historical information becomes not only strategically functional,

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<sup>27</sup> English translation: “But by immersing myself again in the recorded interviews of 1982 with the intention of editing the manuscript, I was entrapped by the question of the present. And where are these witnesses? Where are the survivors? Did all die? Did San Francisco end? That’s how one of the witnesses of the Yulaurel neighboring community came over screaming – “San Francisco is done” – the day after the massacre. And so the past brought me to the present. I visited them many times, as much in Mexico like in Guatemala. They were moved by the interviews past witnesses gave, and they added dates and dates. They made history...”

but necessary as well; he states, “[N]o hemos tenido tiempo, paciencia, ni fuerza para sistematizar todo completamente. Pero es también bueno que quede así, porque el intento de sistematización puede forzar los datos y hay cosas que quedan engalanando la descripción. Sobran a veces pormenores, pero también falta información... son piezas para un retrato” (68).<sup>28</sup> The statement’s claim to an impossible systemization of facts also references a kind of impossible stitching of information into a uniform history of truth. Indeed, insofar as there hasn’t been time, patience, or will dedicated to such a project, there is also an array of missing details that impedes a historical recovery. By ending with the phrase, “son piezas para un retrato,” Falla posits not just the incompleteness of a fragmented history, but also a spectral past: the portrait of missing pieces becomes a present absence both as something simultaneously evoked yet inaccessible, and what has and has not been documented.<sup>29</sup>

By announcing a project of recovery that is incomplete and impossible to document, we repudiate the notion that the historical memory of an event like the Guatemalan civil war is free of inconsistencies. Kirsten Weld’s 2014 book, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, offers an account of how the discovery of the Guatemalan National Police Archive in 2005 challenged the management of memory and the importance of historical knowledge production. As part of her dissertation research, Weld’s participation in the restoration of the archive, known as the “Project of Recovery for the National Police Historical Archives” (PRAHPN), meant interacting with over one hundred thousand documents detailing illegal government surveillance practices and gross human rights violations. Identity cards, fingerprint

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<sup>28</sup> English translation: “We have not had the time, patience, or strength to systemize everything completely. But it is also a good thing that it remains that way because the act of systemizing can force the data and there are things that embellish the description. Sometimes details are missing, but information is also missing... they are pieces for a portrait.”

<sup>29</sup> The phrase is taken from an article dedicated to Monsignor Romero:  
[http://www.iglesia.cl/especiales/mons\\_romero/caminando/Piezas-para-un-retrato.pdf](http://www.iglesia.cl/especiales/mons_romero/caminando/Piezas-para-un-retrato.pdf)



files, pictures, interrogation transcripts, and logbooks codified acts of state terrorism that, as Weld claims, require an engagement with the archive to “document the *process*, not to process the *documents*” (23). In other words, what is at stake in the rescue of police documents are the processes of narration that transform a hidden, decaying archive into an institution for social change. For Weld, archives are not simply repositories of material, but rather “a unit of analysis unto themselves” (13); she claims, “the memory work represented by the police archives’ rescue is more about knowledge production than it is about knowledge recovery... the archives act-generating archival subjects, historical narratives, and state practices” (15). Neither state violence nor the legal persecution of the National police is at the center of her research. Instead, the group of activists and rescuers in charge of sifting through 80 million documents and their experience with the archive become the point of negotiation between a violent past and the country’s democratic future.

In section three, titled, “Archives and Social Reconstruction in Postwar Guatemala” discusses how workers were emotionally and politically transformed as they engaged with archival systems of organization. In particular, Weld states that “[T]he codification methodology in particular, quantitative in nature, was designed to literally transform each document into a set of data points. It allowed workers only to record what the document *actually said*, not what they thought the document implied or euphemistically suggested” (169). To read the documents as transparent sets of data rather than as narratives revealing a violent discourse is an intervention that denies and occludes state terror. For example, when workers like Jacinto read that certain high profile state assassinations were carried out by “*gente desconocidos*,” they questioned “whether or not the methodology will end up revealing what you know, with the experience you have” (170). While Jacinto’s experience reveals that the codification methodology can and

objectively does sever the relationship between historical memory and lived experiences, it also exposes how institutions construct truth. His memories may have no quantifiable value in the construction of an institutional archive, but they do function as private sites of knowledge that reencounter and reframe the past, challenging the way documents convey value.

Consequently, in “The Labors of Memory,” Weld illustrates how formal divisions of labor classified the archive as a space of employment that marginalized personal and emotional work. She describes, in particular, the conflicting tensions that arose when employment procedures transformed the archive from a collective human rights project to a project managed by bureaucratic rules. Workers who first began the daunting task of sifting through documents resented the fact that they were soon excluded from the investigative procedures consigned to case investigators and researchers, citing how strategic methods of organization kept certain documents secret and reified the tactics of state social control. In another insightful moment that challenges the mechanisms of control involved in archive formation, Weld quotes Jacinto as claiming, “[T]he archives have come to be seen as a business... and the people who work there are seen as the workers in a business, workers for an employer who requires a product... But I am a thinking person, and I fought for my ideas, and I keep fighting for my ideas...” (172). Jacinto’s experience with the models of operation at work in the archive allows him to understand how power relations, identified through the business/employer analogy, become exchanges that transform the archives’ value into an economic “product.” However, that he claims he is “a thinking person” who must fight for his ideas simultaneously recognizes the various labors at play. The postwar archive is a space of struggle where the daunting task of recovering valuable information consistently reveals that “work” is a process that generates alternative forms of resistance. Moreover, I want to consider this archival scenario as a scene of

abjection wherein Jacinto's testimony represents the excessiveness and uncontainable nature of the archive. He emphasizes the importance of his ideas as both intrinsic to the function of the archive and outside of its capitalist construction, blurring the limits between public and private work.

In the context of postwar Guatemala, concepts like "truth" and "reconciliation" are intricately woven to reveal a project of political reform that upholds democratic values.<sup>30</sup> They become products of a common peace goal generated by international accords and state reparations that attempt to frame social justice as a ritual of forgiveness and forgetting. While many scholars have explored the contradictions and problematic processes that prevent a vulnerable Central America from transitioning into a peaceful future, this particular approach to political restitution is illustrated and reframed into a process of social reconstruction in *Paper Cadavers*.<sup>31</sup> According to Weld, in the preservation of the National Archive, social reconstruction became a common goal generated by the work of ex-revolutionaries and police officers rather than by governmental contracts and "the building of monuments" (177). She states that the collaborative efforts exerted by both groups "demonstrated the critical difference between social 'reconciliation' and social *reconstruction*. Reconstruction represented the building of something new and distinct, of a "transitional element," rather than a return to a poisoned status quo..." (177). For Weld, the colloquial tasks that informed the cooperation between state

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<sup>30</sup> Truth and Reconciliation commissions have been predominantly used in Latin America since the late twentieth century: Bolivia's *National Commission of Inquiry Into Disappearances*, 1982; Chile's *National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation*, 1990; *The Truth Commission for El Salvador*, 1993; etc. The most popular and globally recognized truth commission was formed in South Africa in 1995.

<sup>31</sup> For more work on the discovery of the National Police Archive in Guatemala, see the University of Texas, Austin's "Digital Archive of the Guatemalan National Police Historic Archive:" <https://ahpn.lib.utexas.edu/>

actors like police officers and progressive thinkers like Jacinto signaled a very slow but significant shift into a brighter future where the archive played a facilitating role.

However, I would like to take a more nuanced and cynical approach to the role of archives in mediating collaborative efforts that perform an idealized politics of democracy. For example, I took a research trip to Guatemala City in June 2015. My objective was to visit a museum I could identify by name and location, but otherwise didn't know too well. Called "El Museo de los Mártires del movimiento sindical estudiantil y popular de Guatemala," the museum is located inside a 30 by 18 foot garage that belongs to the Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala<sup>32</sup>. As one of Guatemala's only museum dedicated to those forcibly disappeared during the civil war, it houses the remains of an industrial union leader named Samuel Amanacio Villatoro who was kidnapped in 1984.<sup>33</sup> After his remains were found in 2011 and identified by FAFG, his son, Samuel Villatoro Jr., decided to display the remains in the museum. Erroneously, I believed Museo de los Mártires would be easily accessible to the public, but, upon arrival, the secretary at the front desk of the forensics lab informed me that the museum is not an independent site per se, but rather, as the address states, is an extension of the Fundación's building and work. In order to enter, I needed to inform the museum site director or a volunteer worker so that they could be my tour guides. The space is so small and in such a slow state of development that I also needed to experience the museum as a discursive space, a space of

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<sup>32</sup> The Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala or FAFG is a non-profit, non-governmental organization in charge of collecting, documenting, and investigating human rights violations that occurred during the civil war. They focus, in particular, on the forensics identification of human remains to address unresolved murders.

<sup>33</sup> Perez, Sonia D. "Guatemalans use portraits, museum to seek missing." *U.S. News and World Report*, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2013/11/15/guatemalans-use-portraits-museum-to-seek-missing>.

shared stories.<sup>34</sup> I would come to realize soon enough that the museum I looked for was and is not really a museum, or at least not in the traditional sense of the word. It is a collection of objects and narratives with multifaceted purposes: museum and archive, search center and safe space, sepulcher and secular altar. It is, in short, a very active and fluid space, becoming an integral part of the work currently underway in Guatemala City despite its humble and clandestine setup.

### **Buried in the Archives: Problematizing Recovery**

In what follows, I bring into account my experience of Museo de los Mártires because I believe it merits analytical consideration and functions as supplement to Weld's narrative on the politics of archival thinking.<sup>35</sup> To call Museo de los Mártires both archive and museum is to acknowledge that the space of commemoration is also a grassroots effort to reassemble historical materials that openly threaten the state since their visibility holds the state accountable to a past it constantly denies. Achilles Mbembe states in "The Power of the Archive and its Limits" that the archive is "not a piece of data, but a status" because it grants privileged status to certain documents and refuses others (20). He claims that through archived materials, we are presented with fragments and debris of the past "to be placed in order" and ultimately to free the state of its debt:

[A]rchiving is a kind of internment, laying something in a coffin, if not to rest, then at least to consign elements of that life which could not be destroyed purely and simply.

These elements, removed from time and from life, are assigned to a place and a sepulcher

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<sup>34</sup> In 2015, when I contact El Museo de los Mártires offering my help to design and develop a website for the museum, I was told that the Museum was at risk of permanently closing due to lack of funding. Most of their funding support comes from generous donations by visitors and from free rent/electricity provided by FAFG. As of 2017, they are still open to the public.

<sup>35</sup> Archival thinking is a phrase Weld introduces in her book to discuss the political and social importance of archiving.

that is perfectly recognizable because it is consecrated: the archives. Assigning them to this place makes it possible to establish an unquestionable authority over them and to tame the violence and cruelty of which the ‘remains’ are capable, especially when these are abandoned to their own devices (22).

Mbembe frames the process of archiving as an act of silencing. Using the image of the sepulcher, he alludes to a ritual of interring that requires the simultaneous recognition of “remains” and their disavowal as autonomous fragments “removed from time and from life.” Similarly, we are confronted with the literal debris of Guatemala’s historical violence in Museo de los Mártires. By displaying Samuel Amanacio Villatoro’s remains (Figure 2.1), the museum becomes both a material sepulcher and a repository of political “truth.” Yet, museum is neither in service of nor subjected to the power of the state. Villatoro’s remains are the tangible proof of a longstanding debt the state refuses to compensate and a specter of the silence that haunts postwar Guatemala. Those that perform the labor of maintaining this repository of sorts are the local family members still in search of the missing, tracking scattered clues, decoding military logbooks, and reassembling the remains of loved ones until they restore fragments of a life long lost. Yet, I argue that the museum’s thematic and formal structures illustrate the impossibility of closure in



Figure 2.1: Remains of Amanacio Samuel Villatoro

the recovery of bodies. Unlike Weld's observation of a democratic relationship between activists and state agents, El Museo de los Mártires is a space that is always at odds with the state.

When I enter Museo de los Mártires, I enter what looks like a room divided by panels into smaller sections. At the outset are two adjacent walls that preview what the museum is all about. On the left hand side is a wall-sized poster headlining 187 fichas, or 187 police index cards featuring people who disappeared in Guatemala City from 1980-1982. The cards contain pictures and biographical information that are part of a military logbook mysteriously sent to an American anthropologist.<sup>36</sup> On the right hand side is yet another poster that details the discovery and exhumation of seven bodies once part of the missing 187. The poster explains that some of the disappeared were students or professors at the local university, while others were working-class union leaders. Directly across the way is the entrance into the second half of the museum, however, there is also an opening perpendicular to the entrance that leads into a smaller, dark backroom. During this initial visit, I explore the museum without the help of a tour guide and since the perpendicular openings present a quasi-fork path, I do not know whether to continue towards the second half of the room or deviate into the backroom. I decide, because the museum is so small, that I'll look into the backroom first and then proceed onward. I am conscious that I make this decision out of fear rather than genuine curiosity. I know that one of the highlights of the museum are the displayed remains of Samuel Amanacio Villatoro and part of me wants to see them, fear the encounter, and accept their existence before the tour guide arrives to lead me into the room.

I claim fear not so much of the macabre, but fear in unintentionally presenting myself as a spectator, or a researcher gazing with disrespectful curiosity at the remains of a human being.

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<sup>36</sup> For more information on the discovery of the military logbook and the subsequent role of forensic anthropologists in searching for the disappeared, see Yates, Pamela, director. *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator*. Skylight, 2011.

After all, there are plenty of signs at the entrance stating the museum is a dignified space for the disappeared that should be revered and respected. After the remains were found in 2011, Villatoro Jr. decided that his father would not be buried, but rather be made public since the government had vanished him for so long. To paraphrase his intentions, the remains are visible in order to serve as testament to the violence inflicted by the Guatemalan government. While some members of the community believe Villatoro should be buried for religious reasons, Villatoro Jr.'s political move is precisely what I believe disrupts the very foundation of the museum. If what is at stake in the manifestation of human fragments is evidence of state terror that is currently denied, has the museum become a "bias of commemoration", commodifying memory?<sup>37</sup> Mbembe states that "[T]he transformation of the archive into a talisman... is also accompanied by removing any subversive factors in memory. In giving those who carry it (in this case who consume it) a feeling of being protected or of being co-owner of a time or co-actor in an event, even if in the past, the talisman softens the anger, shame, guilt, or resentment which the archive tends, if not to incite, then at least to maintain..." (24). Yet the affect produced by Villatoro's displayed remains is that of unmitigated loss and longing, not the softening of anger or resentment. Unlike institutionalized museums of violence in the west, Museo de los Mártires represents a transformational relationship to the past.<sup>38</sup> El Museo is always already a ruptured space, one that does not seek to recover bodies in an effort to remove "subversive factors in memory," but rather to respectfully enter into the ruins of an impossible archive.

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<sup>37</sup> Achille Mbembe is a Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist. I consider his article an important intervention for my work on Guatemala because his work on postcolonial studies criticizes colonial institutions that continue to marginalize subaltern communities. I read the long history of violence in Guatemala against the indigenous community as engaging in similar tactics of oppression.

<sup>38</sup> See Boon, James. "Why Museums Make Me Sad." Poetics and Politics of Representation Conference, 1988, Washington, D.C. Conference Presentation.



In the insightful narrative, *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman embarks on a journey to Ghana to trace the history of the Atlantic Slave trade. Yet, the text does not attempt to map a cultural genealogy or lineage of sorts, reuniting an African-American diaspora to an original point of belonging. Instead, it is marked by the impossibility of return and recovery. Throughout the narrative, Hartman is shocked, saddened, disappointed, and overwhelmed by her status as a stranger in postcolonial Ghana or what she terms as “the proverbial outsider” (3). She is unrecognizable because her journey demands an intimate encounter with slavery’s archive of terror and violence. In a purposeful moment in Chapter 1, Hartman writes, “the rupture was the story. Whatever bridges I might build were as much the reminder of my separation as my connection. The holding cell had supplanted the ancestral village. The slave trade loomed larger for me than any memory of a glorious African past or sense of belonging in the present” (42). For Hartman, the foreboding reality of slavery’s archive and the rupture of belonging are the catalysts that inform her imaginative text. The elusive past helps her reimagine the present as a contradictory event in which the physical journey to Ghana is simultaneously a promise of an understanding of slavery’s archives, and the inescapable obscurities that mark Hartman as unrecognizable.

I relate Hartman’s travel memoir to my experience of El Museo de los Mártires in order to linger in the ruptures that inform belonging. However, by juxtaposing both narratives, I do not mean to conflate the legacy of slavery to a contemporary Guatemalan postwar state, but rather to consider how different narratives represent a self in relation to an opaque history of violence. On the one hand, Hartman’s analysis of slave dungeons as the “black abyss” where human life turned disposable reveals that these dungeons expose nothing more than the waste and filth of her past. She states,

Waste is the interface of life and death. It incarnates all that has been rendered invisible, peripheral, or expendable to history writ large... Waste is the remnant of all the lives that are outside of history and “dissolved in utter amnesia.” The only part of my past that I could put my hands on was the filth from which I recoiled, layers of organic material pressed hard against a stone floor. (115)

This waste and the lives “dissolved in utter amnesia” are all that the material archive of slavery offers as documentation. Yet, from this filth of organic material, Hartman is able to reimagine a new identity that is entangled with the struggles and hopes of the fugitive slave; that is, she is not interested in resurrecting the dead or in refashioning an identity from the filth of human waste, but rather is invested in bringing the past into the present in order to imagine a liberated future. On the other hand, as I will discuss, human remains are what allow Guatemalan community to imagine a possible future where autonomy rather than democratic principles thrives. When the



Figure 1.2: Photograph of woman burying remains

guide, Don Solomon, arrives for my tour, I encounter the shared stories that give the museum a discursive importance. His intimate knowledge of the community and their political labor is necessary to my understanding of what the museum does and produces. The back wall of the museum contains black and white pictures of family members burying the remains of the other 6 men found. The images (Figure 2.2) reveal an affect of despair and gloom, grief abounds the people's appearances, and at the center of some images are minute coffins that seem disproportionally out of place. Their disorienting size makes me think small children are being buried. But that thought doesn't linger long. Don Solomon interrupts every moment of silence between us with a personal anecdote. Here, his testimony is necessary insofar as it shifts the narrative of burial beyond the fixed temporality of pictures. He tells me that Juan De Jesus' parents died within a couple of years of burying his remains. As he points to the other portrayed family members, each pause is punctuated with a statement of their death. Almost everyone has died, and they died days or months after the burial of their loved ones. De Jesus' sister, in particular, was leading a legal case against the Guatemalan government, but died a day or two before I arrived. Don Solomon wants me to understand the toll state sanctioned violence took on an entire community: he says it is not only about the lives disappeared and murdered at the hands of the government, but also about the families. I, on the other hand, seem to understand something more or at least something else. If the violence of forced disappearances render a Guatemalan history that is "dissolved in utter amnesia," then family members of the disappeared represent a Guatemala that imagines itself into existence. What matters to parents and loved ones like Samuel Villatoro Jr. is not just what they have suffered or endured, but rather the fight against forgetting. The burial photographs document a form of self-identification that fichas and forms in police archives are unable to represent: to search for one another, mourn, bury, and die

is to follow a progression of becoming that is rooted in the ongoing struggle to exist. They continue to practice a ritual of liberation where those who exist in the periphery of society or once dwelled in the clandestine graves of military bases may finally find peace.

The final aspect of the museum that was telling for many reasons was the silence that informed the material space of the museum. When I enter the second half, the wall on the left hand side displays 6 pictures of the recovered 7 with a small description of their lives (date of



Figure 2.3: Framed Question Mark

birth, death, occupation, etc.) and a few of the objects found in their exhumation. One picture, however, is missing and in its place is a framed question mark (Figure 2.3). When I asked Don Solomon why there is no picture or description, he says it's because the family wishes to keep his discovery secret for fear of retaliation from the government. And because the family doesn't want anyone to know the disappeared being has been found, the museum has reserved a space for his picture so that his life may be commemorated when the family decides to make his discovery public.

Once again, the museum breaks on itself. In that space of the question is a present absence and an absence, marked by the X, present. The witness understands that a

representational object must be there and yet the current object in its place also has its own importance. It is impossible to archive the unidentified man in a manner that is different from archiving the remains of Villatoro because the museum ultimately becomes what Nelly Richard argues as an aesthetic of rupture.<sup>39</sup> In her book, *Cultural Residues: Chile in Transition*, Richard states that cultural criticism must engage in a dialogue that subverts the language of the present, “it’s logics and rhetorics”, by exploring moments of dissonance and irregularity: “[T]his implies constructing certain *representational maladjustments* that break the functional equilibrium of predefined categories. But certain verbal disaffiliations are also needed, certain idiomatic ruptures, so that the dissonances of the “how” (strangeness, rarities) can introduce their critical signs of alteration and nonconformity into the routines of speech...” (5). In this manner, we may interpret the ruptures in hegemonic forms of representation as introducing alternative ways of knowing. The “*representational maladjustments*” Richard notes are the residual forms and discourses that challenge the transparency of our political and cultural realities. She argues for a rupturist aesthetic precisely to question both the legitimacy of post-dictatorial regimes like Chile and their claims to objective truth in unresolved matters of social justice. Thus, I claim that the framed question hanging inside El Museo is an aesthetic of rupture much like Villatoro’s remains. It is at once a deafening expression of unmournability and a disruption of the museum’s formal configuration. It speaks to what cannot be represented (or re-membered) and to the spectral nature of the museum in which the already present truth remains deep within its ruptures.

### Testimonies, Memories, and their Limits

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<sup>39</sup> Petersen, Amanda L., and Alberto Ribas-Casasayas. *Espectros : Ghostly Hauntings In Contemporary Transhispanic Narratives*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016.

The representability of the past via material objects like photographs and the hauntings such images evoke is briefly explored in Hector Tobar's novel, *The Tattooed Soldier*. The novel is set in the early 1990s as the revenge story of a Guatemalan refugee immigrant living in Los Angeles, CA. When the protagonist, Antonio Bernal, crosses paths with the military lieutenant responsible for murdering his family during the Guatemalan civil war, Antonio is suddenly haunted by fragmented memories of his wife and child's slaying at the hands of the lieutenant, and by his sudden quest for justice through vengeance. It is a narrative that interweaves memories of love and hope in prewar Guatemala with transnational experiences of traumatic violence and loss. In fact, as Antonio's fervor for revenge intensifies, he transforms into a calculated huntsman, tracking the soldier's movements until he trespasses into his enemy's home. Once inside, he frantically rummages through the small apartment, unearthing a photo album that not only reveals the name of the lieutenant, Guillermo Longoria, but also a series of gruesome photographs Longoria collected during the war. Tobar writes,

[W]hen Antonio pulled on the flap, which was tucked in but unsealed, a small stack of photographs fell to the floor... He was squatting to look under the dresser when he saw the bodies, three corpses lined up on a cement floor. Scattered all over the linoleum, everywhere were pictures of corpses. A morgue had fallen from the album and spilled about his feet... His hands trembling, Antonio picked up the corpses and put them back in the envelope, where he wouldn't have to look at them. This was too much to see. Too much to know and hold inside your head. All of the corpses and all of their tragedies, the lives they led, their endings captured in a killer's camera. (176)

Much like Museo de los Mártires, Antonio must contend with the injustices of Guatemala's war and the haunting evidence of dead bodies on display. The photographs turned morgue become

intermediary objects that shift the static past into a fluid present, one falling and spilling about Antonio's feet. Yet, Antonio, unlike Samuel Villatoro Jr., wishes to conceal the pictures, to pick "up the corpses and put them back in the envelope, where he wouldn't have to look at them." In searching for his nemesis' past, Antonio struggles against the emergence of dead absent bodies, yet what he wishes to let go of is the incompleteness of the testimony he encounters. These disappeared bodies are nameless, tucked and hidden in the metaphoric morgue of the album. So, when they manifest as images, Antonio must accept that to see these pictures is to also acknowledge he is incapable of bearing witness to "all of their tragedies, the lives they led..."

The traces of the disappeared manifest themselves in various narratives struggling to articulate a postwar Guatemalan identity. In Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Seneslessness*, the narrator of this antiheroic tale is an opportunistic unnamed writer hired by the Catholic Church to copyedit transcribed accounts of Indigenous people who survived a brutal civil war. These testimonies, he is informed, will form part of a truth and reconciliation report initiated by the country's Archbishop. However, as the task of editing "one thousand one hundred" pages of testimonies begins, our narrator is struck by the imperfect use of Spanish, developing an unhealthy obsession with the language and what he calls its poetic qualities. He begins and ultimately frames the novel with the phrase, "I am not complete in the mind", decontextualizing a Kaqchikel man's testimony of trauma in order to describe his own personal situation:

[Erick] asked me if I would be interested in copyediting the final report of the project he was involved in, a project that consisted of recovering the memories of hundreds of survivors of and witnesses to the massacres perpetuated in the throes of the so-called armed conflict between the army and the guerrillas... it was really a great gig, five thousand dollars just to put the final touched on project that dozens of people had

participated in, beginning with the group of missionaries who had managed to record the oral testimonies of the Indians, witnesses and survivors, most of whom didn't even speak Spanish very well and who were afraid above all else of anything that had to do with the events they had been victims of, followed by those in charge of transcribing the tapes, and ending with teams of distinguished professionals, who would classify and analyze the testimonies and who would also write up the report, my friend Erick explained to me in detail... knowing that I would never refuse such an offer... because he perceived that I am not complete in the mind. (6)

The book not only opens with the statement “I am not complete in the mind” to illustrate the mental state of our narrator, but also to frame its own incompleteness. If the report in progress represents a hierarchical ordering of facts by “missionaries” and “distinguished professionals,” then the act of constructing truth is disrupted by the narrator’s appropriation of the lines. That is, the narrator’s role as copyeditor necessarily presents an epistemological contradiction. On the one hand, his job is indebted to a neocolonial process of “copyediting” that relegates the Indigenous testimonies as inaccessible without mediation. The narrator is more of a cultural translator actively constructing an image of the other, free of linguistic errors, while simultaneously letting the object or testimonies speak for themselves. On the other hand, his usurpation of the phrase “I am not complete in the mind” points to the ironic positionality of the narrator in the process of transcription. He is an unreliable figure of authority because he is a self-serving writer, and it is these very acts of appropriation that attest to what is at stake in the novel: that we should be concerned not with the status of the testimonies, but rather their use.



In his agonizing attempt to help construct a report on human rights violations, the narrator participates in an act of deconstruction, extracting and resignifying fragments of testimonies he imbues with poetic sentiments. The fragments are aestheticized as poetry in order to distance the narrator and reader from the horrific realities of state violence and to render a sharp critique of the institutions that collect and disseminate historical truth. According to Nancy Buiza, Horacio Castellanos Moya has explicitly stated he does not like the genre of testimonio nor does he “cultivate it.”<sup>40</sup> She writes that Moya believes testimonio “‘had become a kind of new church’ that politically engaged authors were expected to follow... [I]n its heyday ‘you were supposed to believe in the truth of these novels, the literal truth... Why? Because the backbone of testimonio is historical truth’” (152).<sup>41</sup> While testimonio has been a powerful tool of representation in subaltern studies, Moya’s critique of the genre challenges what we perceive as credible and legitimate. What is at stake in the deconstruction of testimonies into fragments of beauty and “musicality” that, as the narrator posits, “should have been written on the walls of this bar-café instead of those horrible verses by leftist poetasters...” (32), is the unraveling of a cultural archive wherein the genre of testimonio becomes dissonant, fragmented, and ultimately useless. But, it is in testimonio’s uselessness that Moya is able to craft a novel that does not conform to postwar narratives lacking affective links to the past or, as Perez Molina said in the opening statement of this chapter, that do not stumble upon the past.

Moya’s critique and departure from canonical literary techniques like testimonio renders his novel as an experimental text of sorts. For example, if, as Kirsten Weld claims in *Paper*

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<sup>40</sup> Buiza, Nanci. “Trauma and the Poetics of Affect in Horacio Castellano Moya’s *Insensatez*.” *Washington University, St. Louis: Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> For more criticism on the role of testimonio in Moya’s writing see Castro, William H. “On Rethinking The *Testimonio*, Solidarity, and Democracy in Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *El arma en el hombre*.” *Penn Press: Revista Hispanica Moderna*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2010.

*Cadavers*, “archival thinking requires us to look past the words on a document’s page to examine the conditions of that document’s production: how it came to exist, what it was used for, what its form reveals, and what sorts of state knowledge and action it both reflected and engendered” (13), then *Senselessness* is a satirical parody of the archive. The unnamed narrator is not invested in the origins and usage of the documents he reads, but rather fails to account for the conditions of the documents’ production in his obsession of the fragments. But by focusing on the fragmented testimonies as ruptures of/in historical truth, Moya is able to articulate an affective relationship to trauma. Chapter nine, for instance, contains a total of ten sentences that stretch over the ten pages that compose the chapter. These long and convoluted sentences relate not only the character’s traumatic experience with the testimony of a girl who survived torture and works at the same Church the protagonist inhabits, but also the ways in which madness enacts an affective restaging of trauma. When the narrator is told that Teresa, whose testimony afflicts him so much, works in the Archbishop’s palace, he reimagines her testimony in an attempt to exorcize the trauma he has embodied. Sometimes he declares that he feels her fear, “I again *felt the shudder of that girl*... dragged along by Lieutenant Octavio Perez, her vagina and anus torn to shreds” (my emphasis; 98), while other times he occupies the moment of fear, “the lieutenant made that perfect castrating cut, which produced a howl as if the victim had been fully conscious, the most horrendous howl the girl had ever heard, which would awaken her at night for the rest of her life... the same howl that made me stampede out of the bishop’s office to the courtyard...” (99). At each moment, however, his narration is interrupted by a sudden desire to “flee to the courtyard” (98). The dividing line between outsider or spectator and victim breaks when Teresa materializes as a real living person. She is no longer relegated to the margins of the report nor subjected to a spectral existence as the “words in a document’s page.” Teresa’s trauma

and presence exist as an extension of the narrator's labor, and the shifting experience of trauma that moves from past tense, "I again felt the shudder", to present, "the same howl that made me stampede" restages an affective relationality.

The narrator's fragile psyche and erratic arguments never offer us a narrative of reconciliation or compensation despite its confessional tone. Instead, it exalts confusion and paranoia to convert the archive that became the REHMI report into a fictional parody representing truth as a state of crisis. If the narrative of a postwar Guatemala that circulates in archives, history books, and political speeches sanitizes historical violence, then Moya's novel evokes the names of wartime figures to dismantle the hegemonic forces that maintain state terror. The lieutenant in charge of Theresa's torture, Octavio Perez Melina, is a direct reference to former military lieutenant and president of Guatemala, Otto Perez Molina. This critical gesture shatters the logic of order that privileges a dissociative relationship to the past for the sake of moving forward. When Perez Melina's heinous acts of torture against Teresa are enunciated, she is entering the Archbishop's palace as a living survivor. Her presence unsettles the narrator, and in his dislocated subjectivity, the novel becomes an uneasy expression of truth, compiling and circulating both the narrator's failure to divorce the scene of torture from the living body and the erratic articulation of a name that brings to fore the perpetrators of torture. The novel's structural errantry is a performative rupture in the literary traditions and discursive practices that silence victims of violence.

Moya's critique that testimonies of violence cannot be contained or resolved by human rights reports further unfolds as the narrator succumbs to a complete state of paranoia. Halfway through the novel, the narrator begins to fantasize about a testimony he considers to be perfect for a metafictional novel. In the imagined narrative, an indigenous civil registrar is assassinated

by local police officers for refusing to hand over a book containing the names of dead townspeople. Their names, according to the narrator, are needed so the lieutenant “could bring them back to life so they could vote for the party of General Rios Montts” (60). However, the civil registrar refuses to surrender the book and is executed by the armed forces. Consequently, his name cannot be catalogued in the book, making his death unofficial and condemning his soul to purgatory. Moya writes,

“[T]he story would begin with the explanation that the soul of the registrar would remain in purgatory until somebody could enter him into the death register, which was very difficult to do given the fact that he alone knew where he had hidden it, which is why the story would center around the efforts of the civil registrar’s soul in purgatory to communicate to his friends so they could write him into the death register without the military finding out, and through this would be revealed the history and significance of the register... (62)

What is important here is that the absence of the dead body functions as a double effacement: on one level the registrar cannot be accounted for in the book of the dead and on another his soul must rest in a liminal space of spiritual (un)belonging until he is heard by his friends. Unlike the phrase, “I am not complete in the mind,” the narrator presents a testimony that manifests itself in an imaginative space, moving away from the direct transcriptions he has been invoking. At this moment, the novel breaks from an aesthetic that romanticizes testimonies of trauma as poetic and instead incorporates these historical narratives into a fictional present to make them meaningful. In other words, rather than engaging in a form of appropriation, our narrator is beginning to confront the impossibility of mourning and grievance that manifests itself in the accounts of violence.

While we may expect the novel to culminate in the publication of the Church's report on human rights violations, the narrator instead becomes the voice of the accounts beyond the document. In his delusional state of mind, the narrator begins to experience the trauma of the survivors when he expresses the urge to repeat out loud the testimonial fragments he has written in a private notebook. He asserts,

I would discover something or at least conjure up the possibility of finding somebody instead of myself, and as a result of certain associations and the fear of discovering myself to be different in the mirror, there settled into my mind the sentence that said, *They were people just like us we were afraid of*, which I repeated without taking my eyes off myself, even when I lifted the beer mug I didn't lose sight of myself out of the corner of my eye nor did I stop repeating, *They were people just like us we were afraid of...* (my emphasis, 137)

By claiming that he would "conjure up the possibility of finding somebody instead of myself," the narrator begins to embody a shared trauma that loops in his repetition of "*they were people just like us we were afraid of*." This affective state of entrapment dislocates our narrator's sense of self; he is afraid of "discovering myself to be different in the mirror," becoming detached, unknown, and unrecognizable to himself. Yet, it is also important to observe that he remarks that "as a result of certain associations" he has embodied the traumatic sentence. Indeed, in this dissociative state of mind where paranoia and reality conflate, our narrator loses the possibility of reclaiming his position of authority as a cultural translator. In this manner, *Senselessness* through its antihero reveals the ways in which a history of violence permeates a social imaginary; our narrator is no longer an individual spectator in the construction of historical memory, but rather an active witness to a collective trauma that has not found closure or healing.

On the contrary, Sylvia Sellers Garcia's book, *When the Ground Turns in Its Sleep*, presents a narrator named Nitido Aman who falsely claims to be employed by the Catholic Church as a priest. Nitido, the novel's protagonist, is a Guatemalan-American man that embarks on a journey to Guatemala in 1993 in search of his parent's hometown. He hopes to piece together a lost past and to understand his parents' reasons for leaving the town of Rio Roto, but upon arriving discovers that Guatemala's past is marked by fragmented memories and a collective silence. Written in both a first and second person point of view, Nitido's story is framed as a diary-like entry to his father who recently passed away after suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Struggling against this metaphor of amnesia, the novel does not only attempt to reveal unspoken secrets and truths, but also to construct itself as a narrative framed by loss. What is at stake in his address to his father is that the gesture is a way of reimagining moments of relationality. More than discovering the lost past of Rio Roto, Nitido is invested in shifting the parameters of loss: instead of speaking beyond loss, we must speak through it.

In his adoptive role as priest, Nitido plagiarizes sermons from Latin American history books, listens to confessions that turn into declarations of illnesses, and administers the sacraments of marriage and anointing of the sick. He explores Rio Roto in an attempt to connect with people and ask questions about neighboring villages, but they hesitate to answer his questions. Every attempt to understand and uncover a familial and national history returns as a haunting silence that bewilders Nitido. Although *When the Ground...* is a narrative of return by a man who was born in Guatemala but moved at an early age to the United States, it is also a narrative of discovery. Much like Saidiyah Hartman realizes in *Lose Your Mother*, Nitido's arrival in Rio Roto is immediately defined by his own otherness, his status as a stranger in Guatemala. The journey he proceeds to narrate is thus informed by encounters with troubling

secrets and fragmented (hi)stories, and one that is not so much defined by the disinterring of a past as much as it is determined by the impossibility of feeling whole in a land he does not recognize.

Many Central American scholars have engaged with the concepts of loss and transgenerational trauma in *When the Ground Turns in its Sleep* by arguing for a reading of the novel as postmemory.<sup>42</sup> Miriam Hirsch's seminal book, *The Generation of Postmemory*, declares that,

'postmemory' describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up... Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the structure of postmemory and the process of its generation (5).

Insofar as Nitido assumes a relationship to the past through "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" when he plagiarizes sermons or reads his father's journal to make sense of Guatmela, he is part of this postmemory generation. However, I read the novel as exposing a

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<sup>42</sup> See Martinez, Susana S. "The Spectrality of Political Violence: Exhuming Guatemala's Past in Tanya Maria Barrientos' *Family Resemblance* and Sylvia Seller's *When the Ground Turns in its Sleep*"

more complicated relationship to “inherited memories.” Nitido is not simply dominated by narratives that preceded his birth or consciousness, but rather by their inaccessibility. His investment in a reconstruction of the past is informed by the disparate secrets and inconsistencies that generate shared traumas and memories. That is, he belongs to a “generation after” that bears the burden of re-membering traumas as intergenerational experiences that “still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension.”

Of the many unexpected visitors Nitido receives while settling into the routine of priesthood none is more shocking than Santos’ arrival. Santos is the mayordomo of the neighboring town, Naranjo, who is unexpectedly dumped at Nitido’s front door after being severely attacked and wounded by unknown assailants. The arrival generates both fear and confusion amongst the townspeople, leaving Nitido in a perpetual state of confusion as he cares for the wounded man. When Santos awakens, he notices people have been curiously observing him from a distance; he tells Nitido,

“‘They come and look. Haven’t you noticed?’/‘No.’/‘They’re wondering whom to blame.’/I stared at him. ‘What do you mean?’/He waved his hand over his body.

‘Wouldn’t you wonder- don’t you, Nitido- who it was?’ He laughed softly. ‘Who says it’s in the blood.’ He shook his head. I did wonder, or at least I had initially. But I had given it up. I suppose I’d assume that, as with so much else, what seemed inscrutable to me was well known to others in Rio Roto. It came as a complete surprise: the idea that silences in Rio Roto could arise not only from secrecy but also from doubt.” (127-128)

In Nitido’s acceptance that he lacks an understanding of the past and current conditions of Rio Roto, he takes for granted that silences could also indicate a collective uncertainty. Here, Nitido, just like the townspeople, participates in the traumatic encounter of a wounded Santos. He,



alongside Santos and all who bear witness to his broken body, must navigate through the secrets that have severed the relationship between Rio Roto and Naranjo in order to understand the violence at hand. Because so much of postwar Guatemala has been shaped by a lack of accountability and continued terror, Nitido's journey shifts away from an investigative understanding of the past and repositions itself within the ongoing "traumatic fragments of events."

Shared traumas in *When the Ground...* manifest themselves in the living realities of Rio Roto and Naranjo as well as in discursive spaces. When Nitido learns that the sacristy he resides in was once the site of a massacre carried out by the Guatemalan armed forces during the war, he is more concerned by his (in)ability to relate an authentic account of events. He worries that the story as told by Xinia, his confidant from Rio Roto, has been narrated as though it belongs to him: "[I]n recalling what Xinia told me, I realize that her thoughts have surfaced repeatedly as I write; perhaps I've passed them off as mine... It might be that nothing I've written is really mine, and the only novelty is one of combination. If this is true, it's not possible to steal ideas; it's only possible to plagiarize patterns of accumulation, arrangements and rearrangements of words and thoughts blackened from use" (220). In his realization that ideas cannot be stolen but rather recounted as plagiarized "patterns of accumulation, arrangements and rearrangements of words and thoughts..." Nitido participates in acts of improvisatory re-membering. Although he did not witness the massacre, Nitido creates his own syncretic memories based on what he has observed and what he has been told thus far. In fact, the attention to how stories repeat themselves in the past and present serves as a contrast to the narrator's role as copy-editor in *Senselessness*. Nitido is not concerned with documenting a historical truth or collecting and

disseminating objective information. He is attempting to shape a language that performs the very act of reimagining the past as part of the present, the collective as part of the individual.

The more Nitido tries to make sense of his parent's past the more he relies on his father's journal as a map for belonging. The absent father in *When the Ground...* is important insofar as he links the diasporic subject to Guatemala vis-à-vis a representation of past events and places. However, while Nitido seeks to understand the origins and conditions of his familial history, the past is revealed to be as incomprehensible as his present experiences. He narrates to his father: "the pieces you wrote have grown less rather than more distinct, and it began to seem likely that you simply collected the four days in one confusion. The log in Naranjo strikes me now as nothing more than a coincidence. There must be one like it in California that you sat on briefly or saw from a passing train. Then when you attempted to recall a day you and I spent together, you inadvertently combined one occasion with another. You were only recording the deterioration of your memory" (238). In this context, memories fail to signify what Nitido believes is an authentic portrayal of Guatemala. The "log in Naranjo" may have been one seen in California so the diary becomes a repository of incongruous thoughts, and the breakdown of a chain of signification he has been following while living in Rio Roto. Indeed, as insignificant as the moment may seem in the grand scheme of things, the log, like Xinia's story of the sacristy massacre, serves as a meta-reflection on the construction of narrative and history in postwar Guatemala. Nitido does not share innocuous moments of serenity with his father, but rather the unreliability of memories. For Nitido, to read his father's journal is to enter into an archive of deteriorated memories and to understand that the past is a narrative that is unreliable and fragmented.

Beyond the historical and collective contradictions that inform Nitido's experience of Rio Roto, he also confesses to personal hesitations and a sense of incomprehension. Within a few days of his arrival to town, Nitido claims that "[S]ince my arrival in Rio Roto I'd almost always understood, in a literal sense, everything people said to me. I never had to ask anyone to repeat or rephrase what they'd said. But I often had the impression, as I had in the Malvinas, that I'd nevertheless failed to grasp the meaning behind their words. I can only describe it as a kind of unaccountable incompleteness, as though every time someone spoke to me a few of the words fell away before they reached me. Everything I heard seemed to have missing pieces." (62) As though to make his status as an imposter palpable, Nitido confesses that language and the meanings it conveys present an alternative space of unbelonging. Moreover, by stating that he can "only describe it as a kind of unaccountable incompleteness, as though every time someone spoke to me a few of the words fell away before they reached me," the project of recovering a past becomes inverted; in other words, his story does not offer the exposure of a secreted past, but the threat of incomprehension, of inaccessible knowledge. So in Nitido's articulation of arrivals and (mis)encounters, language functions as a kind of hinge that both opens and closes an impossible text.

Although Nitido eventually obtains the fragmented truths of his parent's lives in Guatemala during his visit to the neighboring town of Naranjo, he feels further away from a feeling of completeness. For example, when he explains to his deceased father the story of his paternal grandmother's death, how she had moved to the city for a higher paying job, only to die of a heart attack and then be buried in an unmarked grave, he declares, "[F]or many years I'd felt the terrible remoteness that came from knowing too little. Having corrected it, I found the distance that once stretched out before me, an expanse of blankness, replaced by another. I'd

often imagined Naranjo, and only knowing it revealed how completely I'd failed to approach it... Farther uphill slept houses full of strangers. They were unknown to me, and they would remain that way, and I was lost in a place where all the things I'd ever seen, thought, and imagined were lost to me" (275). Insofar as Nitido's journey is one of historical and familial discovery, it is also a transnational journey out of the nation-state. Thus, the expansive Guatemalan rural landscape becomes symbolic of Nitido's displaced identity. When he states, "I found the distance that once stretched out before me, an expanse of blankness, replaced by another," he is lost in a space of no return. Naranjo and the memories his father forgets in his dementia represent a rupture in belonging. Indeed, for Nitido, the failure of accounting for a story that would present a return to an originary point of belonging marks him as always already an outsider looking in. Yet, it is only in this space of displacement, that Nitido can reveal a seeming contradiction between what is unaccountable and the drive to account, to fill books with accounts and names.

Both *Senselessness* and *When the Ground Turns in its Sleep* present an encounter with a fictional postwar Guatemala that endangers the narrators' lives much in the same way state violence continues to terrorize present day Guatemala. Nitido and the unnamed narrator in *Senselessness* find themselves engaged in a project of reparations that reveals the impossibility of re-membering or rather re-writing the past. For Nitido, the project develops out of a personal desire to understand his parent's self-exile from Rio Roto, while the unnamed narrator is at the service of an institution constructing a human rights report that will bring to justice the state agents involved in genocidal warfare. Yet the characters are met with silence and distrust when they arrive to fulfill their investigative roles. They are simultaneously outside of the historical violence that immersed Guatemala into unspeakable terror and a part of the social reconstruction

process that demands confronting the past for the sake of moving forward. In their journeys, they encounter a Guatemala that cannot rely on official history to account for the disappeared and absent bodies that haunt the narrators' experience and consciousness. So they must engage in acts of narration that resemble the performative role of El Museo de los Mártires where ruptures in logical order and "representational maladjustments" flood the space of the text. In other words, they must contend with the historical gaps and collective silences as formative and productive experiences. Unlike the authoritative powers that render a future state of Guatemala as free from the shackles of its history, literature and cultural spaces like El Museo become what Ana Patricia Rodriguez calls "the reparations imaginary" wherein artists and activists engage in "[C]ollective efforts to repair the past and make right the future" (27). Indeed, to seek a more equitable Guatemalan future is to trace the unresolved injustices that shape the lives of those who still contend with state violence, and of those who live outside its national borders.

## CHAPTER THREE

**Laboring in the Shadows: Gendered Violence, Shared Woundedness, and the Abject Female Body**

Modern people trafficking, it turns out, is not the image many expect—a scar-faced man tending a cage of women. It’s a complex system of everyday lies and coercions that happens just behind our backs. For this very reason, for its open secretiveness, it’s important to look closely into the shadows, to speak with the victims of trafficking, with the women themselves.  
 — Oscar Martinez, *The Beast*

The struggle to reclaim historical memory in postwar countries like Guatemala is not a process restricted to periods of social reconstruction initiated by Peace Accords. Rather, it is a political act of re-membering that reveals a historical continuum of violence in the present-day lives of Central Americans at home and abroad. In the dispossession of people during the wars, migration patterns to the U.S. shifted relationships to home communities and aided in the development of an exploitative trafficking market. On the one hand, there was the birth and rise of la Mara Salvatrucha (M.S.-13) in the early 1990s: a transnational gang that formed in Los Angeles as a result of racial and socioeconomic inequality, but spread roots in Central America when migrant gang members were deported back to El Salvador during its civil war. The insecurity of postwar Central America, conversely, made the Isthmus a transitory region. The outflow of people generated an influx of remittances that have become a driving economic force in recent years, accounting for billions of dollars that make up gross national economies.<sup>43</sup> This relative success of monetary inflow has shaped national discourses that narrate migrant people as necessary products for exportation.<sup>44</sup> In doing so, the relationship between migrants and their

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<sup>43</sup> According to a 2009, Pew Research Center article, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala accounted for more than \$10 billion in remittances in 2007. See, Lopez, Mark, et al. “Appendix B: Trends in Remittances to Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.” *Hispanic Trends*, Pew Research Center, 8 Jan. 2009, [www.pewhispanic.org/2009/01/08/appendix-b-trends-in-remittances-to-mexico-el-salvador-guatemala-and-honduras/#](http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/01/08/appendix-b-trends-in-remittances-to-mexico-el-salvador-guatemala-and-honduras/#).

<sup>44</sup> El Salvador advertisement

home countries has made immigrating to the U.S. a dehumanizing and precarious journey. Currently, the rise of an illicit economy driven by extralegal bodies like M.S. 13 not only facilitates migrants' potential to become exploitative labor, but also exploits the role of violence in producing commodified bodies. Smuggling, kidnapping, and coercion of migrants in transit across Mexico point to the increasingly dangerous forms of structural violence that make Central American migrants a present absence: they are neither protected nor recognized by legal bodies like the U.S. and Mexican governments, but are necessary bodies-cum-commodities that maintain an exploitative capitalist system.

According to Daniel M. Goldstein and Enrique Desmond Arias, present-day violence in Central America might be better understood as a process intimately linked to the production and maintenance of democratic governance. In their book, *Violent Democracies in Latin America*, wartime violence across Latin America has given rise to “violent pluralities” of state and nonstate actors such as transnational gangs, drug cartels, and paramilitary forces. The concept of “violent pluralism” functions to disrupt unproductive understandings of Latin America as a region awash with failed democracies, and to reconsider how “violence is a mechanism for keeping in place the very institutions and policies that neoliberal democracies have fashioned over the past several decades, as well as an instrument for coping with the myriad problems that neoliberal democracies have generated” (*Violent Democracies in Latin America*, 5). However, while this methodological maneuver demands moving away from definitions of “democracy” that glamorize Western European republics as paradigms of successful democratic governance, the editors fall short in explaining why violent pluralisms continue to prevail and how changes to this status quo may occur. In doing so, “violent pluralities” becomes a term that normalizes the ways neoliberal democracies marginalize, undermine, and oppress groups of people at the

service of colonial ideologies.<sup>45</sup> Latin America is defined as a space of perpetual contestation, and while nonstate actors engage in violent forms of resistance to “cope with the myriad of problems that neoliberal democracies have generated,” individuals forced to flee structural forms of violence remain unacknowledged, and expendable bodies in the service of building democracy. But if democratic institutions inevitably create and sustain the conditions of violence that negotiate social order, then could we consider the competing forces of state and nonstate actors as nothing more than entanglements of power? In the space of corruption where the divisions between legal and extralegal bodies blur, is the resulting violence a series of pluralities or a coalition of sorts? And what role do non-violent actors of resistance like activists, journalists, and creative artists play in the creation of social justice and egalitarian institutions?

Thinking of the ways social and political institutions have failed to create egalitarian societies without identifying geographic regions like Central America as spaces naturalized by war is central to my project. In this chapter, I first consider the limits of a humanitarian discourse that tries to represent the Central American migrant as worthy of legal protection and representation. As various news sources attempt to narrate the widespread dangers of crossing Mexico, the language of vulnerability that accounts for migrants often overlooks the various forms of extortion that make female migrants dispensable. Accordingly, I then examine Oscar Martinez’s journalistic novel, *The Beast*, as a book that narrates the Central American migrant’s journey from Mexico to the U.S. as a struggle to survive in a natural and political landscape that renders him/her invisible. I argue that while Martinez’s novel relies on investigative tropes to expose alarming statistics of violence and injustice, the narrative often reinforces the very critiques it is making. Women, in particular, become spectacularized victims of violence, depicted as passive, impervious figures unable to be accounted for. At the very moments the

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<sup>45</sup> Lugones



book attempts to depict the devastating gendered violence that makes women invisible, it fails to extrapolate them from obscurity. In the third and final section of the chapter, I consider Claudia Hernandez's collection of short stories, *De Fronteras*, and Regina Galindo's performance art as nuanced representations of gendered violence that do not simply rely on making the migrant a visible subject worthy of protection. Their creative work departs from representations of vulnerability and victimization, and instead highlights how systems of power and communication desire to spectacularize violence as failure. Both female artists denormalize state violence by staging death, mourning, and abjection as collective experiences. They move away from rudimentary notions of national belonging and re-present the female body as part of a ritual that blurs the lines between self and other.

### **The Power and Limits of Human Rights Discourse**

According to the U.S. government, more than 68,000 unaccompanied migrant children from Central America crossed the border in 2014.<sup>46</sup> The high numbers of children migrating to the U.S. elicited sensational media responses around the country. For some, the wave of children migrants became a rallying cry for stricter immigration laws and border enforcement, while, for others, the shift in immigration pattern represented a humanitarian crisis that had long been overlooked. Unaccompanied children migrants, they claimed, were being driven out of their home countries and separated from families because of the current sociopolitical instability and violence in Central America. The unstable economic realities of the Isthmus are being redefined by the unyielding rise of narco trafficking and gang violence. Media sources and news reports concerned with the immense power of the narco state in Mexico are cross-examining how the U.S.'s war on drugs has caused a second wave of Central American exiles to seek refuge in the

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<sup>46</sup> See the National Conference of State Legislatures website for more information: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/child-migrants-to-the-united-states.aspx>

U.S. However, in this turn to a representational news framework that considers the Central American migrant as a victim of U.S. foreign policy and Mexico's governmental corruption, there is an inability to account for the number of people who disappear in their journeys to the U.S. What is lost in the longstanding enumerations of human rights abuses and the discourse it generates is the way an already vulnerable population of people cannot be rescued from the violence that renders them invisible.

In *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature*, Elizabeth Anker argues that the concept of human dignity, which is commonly understood to enable and define human rights, in conversation with notions of bodily integrity contribute to a longstanding anxiety about the human body that excludes certain people from human rights protections. For example, Anker writes that “the dignified individual in possession of rights is imagined to inhabit an always already fully integrated and inviolable body: a body that is whole, autonomous, and self-enclosed... [A]t the same time, it posits a dangerously purified subject, one purged of the body's assumedly anarchic appetencies: its needs and desires, its vulnerability and decay. And when the body cannot be thus ignored, the liberal tradition generally treats it as an entity that must be repressed, quarantined, or otherwise mastered by reason” (4). Such an understanding of how liberalism and post-enlightenment ideas govern individual bodies, she claims, has come to define not only the language of human rights, but also how it masks and impels discrimination against racialized bodies. Accordingly, Anker facilitates a brief literary analysis of “human rights bestsellers” to argue that while these texts inspire sympathy for the suffering of a third world, postcolonial people, they also reify our views of an ideal Western world. They recycle an imperialist discourse that justifies Western intervention and activism in

foreign spaces, strengthening the notion that the other is always already a violated, fragmented body needing to be remade by western ideals.

The language of human rights is not unitary, constant or coherent.<sup>47</sup> It travels and becomes part of varied legal cultures, reframing the West's relationship to an underdeveloped world. As I argued in Chapter One, the language of the 1980 Refugee Act shifted public and legal debates on whether the Central American migrant of the 1980s could be considered a refugee. Insofar as the Act generated an open-ended interpretation of the clause, "for fear of persecution," a limited amount of people given asylum in the U.S. were granted refugee status because they opposed communist insurrections. Consequently, by displaying a loyalty to western values of capitalism, certain people were rendered dignified of legal protection, while others who fled the same violence were considered alien and criminal. The rippling effects of the wars in Central America and the Refugee Act that criminalized millions of people who remade their lives in the U.S. as undocumented citizens continues to inform how we discuss the status of unaccompanied children migrants. Labeled as a "humanitarian crisis" by the U.S. mainstream media, the debate on whether or not the children are innocent beings worthy of refugee status first considers the prosperity of the body politic. For instance, in 2016 former President Obama sought an additional \$1.8 billion dollars from congress to combat what he called "an urgent humanitarian situation."<sup>48</sup> But conservative pundits argued that any facilitation or flexibility on illegal immigration would swell the ranks of Latino/a/x gang members already in the U.S. When liberal news sources then countered that U.S. intervention in Central America was responsible for the rise of transnational gangs, conservatives added that the children were also diseased. In

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<sup>47</sup> Anker, 6

<sup>48</sup> Shears, Michael. *Obama Asks for \$3.7 Billion to Aid Border*. The New York Times, 8 July 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/us/obama-seeks-billions-for-children-immigration-crisis.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/us/obama-seeks-billions-for-children-immigration-crisis.html).

both the claims to gang activity and illnesses, what is at stake is the health of an American body politic that is good, pure, and whole. By constantly disrupting the left's fetishization of child innocence with claims of violence and harm, conservatives and rightwing politicians dramatize a threat to what Anker calls "the fully integrated and inviolable body." The debates on this "urgent humanitarian situation" vacillate between a liberal discourse that marks the U.S. as a space of haven, recentering a savior/victim dichotomy, and a conservative propaganda that sees the suffering of brown bodies as a threat to the hegemony of the nation-state.

In representations of human rights violations, the stories overwhelmingly frame vulnerability as a gendered experience: women and children are often victimized, while men are characterized as victimizers. Yet, in the case of Central American migrants whose journeys are suspended in Mexico, gendered bodies are left outside of this frame of reference. For example, as a result of the hazardous journeys across Mexico and the added security at the U.S.-Mexico border, Mexico's southern border with Guatemala has become a site of permanent refuge for women. The 2014 documentary, "Crossing Mexico's Other Border," offers a unique look at the brothel businesses emerging on the Mexican side of the Mexico-Guatemala border. Known as Zonas de Tolerancia ("zones of tolerance"), the various border towns boasting extralegal bars, cantinas, and clubs are represented as spaces of deception where modern human trafficking is, as journalist Oscar Martinez claims, an "open secretiveness." On the one hand, migrant women like Yoana, who is a self-proclaimed sex worker, claim "[W]e don't have a schedule, we can go in and out whenever we want. No one is making us do anything" (VICE). While, on the other hand, Migrant Protection Agent, Alejandro Vila, claims that "[I]n the Zones of tolerance, we can also find deceit and when we talk about deceit, we're talking about human trafficking. It's a requirement for human trafficking to occur" (VICE). For Yoana, in particular, working in the

border town of Huixtla, Mexico ironically offers a safe space for her body to come and go as it pleases, shifting the parameters of her labor into a shadow economy that protects her better than the capitalist structure and security state of Guatemala. Yet, for Vila, the economy that drives Zonas de Tolerancia reveals the psychological and manipulative ways human trafficking functions in Mexican territories. Although both statements may be read as opposing arguments on the dangers of sex labor, what the documentary reveals is an aesthetic that scholar Ashley Dawson calls, “cargo culture.” The term refers to “people who have been turned into illegal but nonetheless highly profitable cargo at the hands of powerful global syndicates that furnish underground labor where and when necessary” (180).

While cargo culture has been largely acknowledged as a reality of trafficking activity across migrant routes in Mexico, it is a truth that is complicated by the number of human rights abuses that go unreported. In an analysis of transmigration, author Alyson L. Dimmitt Gnam states, “[S]ome human rights organizations estimate that six in ten women and girl migrants experience rape during their transit, while other service providers in the field estimate eight in ten women migrants experience rape and other forms of sexual assault” (722).<sup>49</sup> Yet, other investigations reveal that in 2014 the Migrant Protection Agency in Chiapas received a total of only six reports of sexual assault. Indeed, state sanctioned statistics have become notoriously unreliable measures of gendered violence. Central American women inhabit a precarious status as borderland sex workers where they not only become vulnerable bodies rendered profitable, but also invisible. To choose, as Yoana claims in “Crossing Mexico’s Other Border,” is an act that further removes migrant women from legal categories of victimization. What is implied in

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<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the great amount of Latina/o scholarship on gendered violence at the U.S.-Mexico border, especially as it relates to the Juarez feminicidios, my research results did not reveal a wide range of academic work on Central American gendered violence in Mexico. This area of study is neglected and should be given more attention by Latina feminist scholars interested in the patterns of violence that affect migrant women and sex laborers.

the few reported cases of sexual abuse is that exploitation rather than consent is the standard for innocence and thus legal protection. Women who choose to engage in sex work do not fall under the category of human trafficking; they are neither victims nor a vulnerable population worthy of salvation.

The notion and image of the migrant as profitable cargo, as illustrated by “Crossing Mexico’s Other Border,” is also at play in Oscar Martinez’s well-known investigative text, *The Beast*. The novel not only follows the trafficking of Central American migrants aboard cargo trains in Mexico, but also explores how the bodies in transit become profitable cargo themselves. It reveals the ways in which state policies deprive displaced people of their legal rights and deploy a language of vulnerability that generates psychological abuse and manipulation. Framed by statistics and footnotes that give the book legitimacy as a research-driven project, the book is in essence a collection of interviews that expose the lived experiences of migrants Martinez encounters throughout his 6 month journey across Mexico. He meets former gang members on the run and border patrol agents; speaks to crippled migrants in shelters and priests. Each person has a uniquely troubling story of migration, disclosing different patterns of abuse, but ultimately pivoting on the hope for a better future outside of the Isthmus. Yet, the women we meet, I argue, are narrated as liminal subjects, victims of their passivity and inaction. They become bodies to be spectated because they do not comply with legal standards of human trafficking. They’re rationale for engaging in sex work, compared to the stories of migrant men Martinez transcribes, shifts them outside of a western paradigm of victimhood and manifests a false sense of self-possession, revealing both the complexities of human agency and its subjugation within shadow economies.

It is also important to note that Martinez embodies a contemporary social order of activists (the academic and journalist) concerned with narrating the migrant as a body worthy of rights and dignity. In fact, he states in *The Beast*'s conclusion that he hopes his American readership will feel "respect for these men and women, for those who have done something for their families that many of us could hardly find the strength to do" (274). His objective is to humanize the transient lives escaping violence and socioeconomic inequalities, to render their hardships visible and, as evident by the phrase "for those who have done something for their families that many of us could hardly find the strength to do," to undo the narrative of crime and illness that informs mainstream discussions of the Central American migrant. Yet, by focusing on the sacrifices migrants perform to maintain familial ties, Martinez quells anxieties of otherness by reifying the paternalistic and heteronormative conditions that exclude certain bodies from the respect they deserve. In effect, it is precisely this method of recovery of the integrated and honorable subjects "who have done something for their families" that redeems the underdeveloped Isthmus and sustains Western values.

In chapter two of *Fictions of Dignity*, Elizabeth Anker claims that a more just and complete understanding of human rights must come from what she calls an "embodied politics of reading." This model, which draws upon Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodied perception, cross-examines how "writers aesthetically reclaim and reanimate registers of corporeal engagement" (3). Anker emphasizes that contrary to post-enlightenment notions of bodily integrity and human dignity the notion of "intercorporeity" helps us understand the Being as beholden to other beings, undermining the binaries of human-animal and culture-nature that structure liberal notions of individuation. She posits, "[G]iven that the ontological condition of embodiment poses a constant reminder of the body's mortality and woundedness, embodiment

itself might seem to represent something of a radical equalizer... [I]n essence, the sheer inescapability of the body's wasting and frailty provides a powerful basis for rethinking interpersonal solidarity to countermand the presumption of atomistic self-interest that subtends liberal formulations of rights" (57). It is the emphasis on a shared woundedness, "the sheer inescapability of the body's wasting and frailty," as way of structuring relationality between beings that is at hand in the literary and cultural works I will consider in parts two and three. While Oscar Martinez's *The Beast* is a book that attempts to reveal a shared woundedness between the geographical space of Mexico and the migrants who traverse it, his reliance on a discursive practice that renders the migrant visible and innocuous to the nation-state strengthens an idealized view of West. *The Beast* redeems men as victims of the inequalities they experience in a region of the world defined by its inability to uphold democratic practices, while descriptions of the wounded land and wounded women become spectacles of the failure and violence.

### **Exclusions and Bodies in Suspension**

Insofar as *The Beast* is a critique the various systems of power responsible for the disappearance and death of thousands of Central American migrants in Mexico, the book also calls for a humanitarian intervention from its western audience. In the opening chapter, "On the Road: Oaxaca," Martinez first meets three brothers from El Salvador who are fleeing gang violence. They are described as hard and tough, cool and innocent, but with an overall self-presentation as *campesinos*: hardworking countrymen. Yet, it is their shared traumatic memories - culminating in the death of their mother- that brings them together on this journey and bolsters their fraternal relationship. For Martinez, the story of these three brothers' suffering becomes a paradigmatic example of the stories he wishes to convey. He narrates, "[T]he brothers felt the



purgatory of their country, they felt the force with which their country spit people out or dropped them dead (twelve murders a day in a country with only six million people). They packed their bags and started north, joining the pilgrimage of upchucked Central Americans. They dove into that stream of escapees. Those fleeing poverty, those fleeing death” (19). The opening of the novel is a story of survival narrated as an epic quest of redress and atonement. The brothers are simultaneously victims of their circumstances, forced out of a country that spits people out or drops them dead, and responsible for their homeland’s sins: “[T]he brothers felt the purgatory of their country.” Martinez’s rhetoric invokes a morality that valorizes kinship bonds and castigates the criminal villains responsible for the high numbers of homicides in El Salvador. In his desire to represent the migrant as a being with an ethical awareness that values familial loyalty, Martinez depicts El Salvador as a country overrun by chaos, churning out “streams of escapees.” He performs the very colonialist discourse that frames The North as a space of escape while Central America is presented as a space of debasement in need of intervention and salvation.

This understanding of Central America as a space of barbarity forcing honorable people to flee is at once an attempt to mobilize an American readership into action and to assuage fears of the other. In the same story of the three brothers, Martinez reminisces for a moment about a former 19-year-old gang member named Saul. He had lived 15 years of his life in Los Angeles, CA but when he got involved with the local 18<sup>th</sup> street gang, he was arrested and deported to Guatemala. On his arrival to a country he did not know, he was jumped by a group of thugs. When he told them that he was looking for his father, Alfredo Guerrero, they took him to the home of a MS-13 member. Guerrero did not claim Saul as his son, but publicly recognized his right to live by telling other gang members that they were not going to kill Saul, rather, they would banish him from town. Consequently, Saul would have to cross borders once again in

order to reunite with his family back in the U.S. After reminiscing about Saul, Martinez turns again to the brothers, claiming “[T]he difference between fleeing and migrating is becoming clearer to me. Fleeing takes speed. The boys know how to flee. Migrating, though, takes strategy, which the brothers don’t have” (23). By marking a difference between migrating and fleeing, Martinez inoculates the young migrant men against the corrupting power of thugs and tropes of criminality that accompany illegal immigration. For these men, salvation from death is dependent on a colonial gaze that sees them as virtuous; that is, insofar as they flee instead of migrating, they are embarking on an odyssey of liberation and self-possession, and thus upholding the liberal values that warrant human rights protection.

Although there are various representations of gendered violence throughout *The Beast*, I now focus on chapter four, “The Invisible Slaves.” This particular section of the book shifts perspectives between three migrant women who work at the Zona de Tolerancia in Huixtla, Chiapas. Their stories underscore an uneasy claim to agency and self-determination while also undermining fixed and observable claims to human trafficking. Instead of offering testimonies that reject the horrors of human trafficking, Martinez depicts the profound losses that have shaped each woman’s life, framing their narratives with investigative footnotes and psychological analyses. For example, before Martinez introduces the first woman, Erika, he writes, “[T]he prostitutes in this region often refer to working one of the bars with a self-reflexive term, *me ocupé*, meaning, literally, I occupied myself, I employed myself. They speak as if they were two, as if one of their selves managed the other, as if the body that had sex with the men was a puppet that they themselves only temporarily occupied or employed” (68-69). These evaluations of the linguistic plays at work in the stories of prostitutes are telling for many reasons. On the one hand, their bodies become tools that perform a paradoxical labor,

simultaneously self-occupying or self-possessing and self-negating. On the other hand, when Martinez asserts, “they speak... as if one of their selves managed the other, as if the body that had sex with the men was a puppet that they themselves only temporarily occupied,” he imagines an absent presence managing the body in prostitution, an ordering of self that is always already a declaration of loss.

To think of migrant women and their testimonies in this manner is to grapple with a violent past that is always present and active. Thus, when we meet Erika, the first woman interviewed by Martinez in Huixtla, we encounter a story of migration that is more about a life’s journey than a once in a lifetime exodus to El Norte. Erika is a Honduran woman depicted as having “white skin and reddish, curly hair” who preferred to settle in Huixtla because she’d heard that “the journey (north) would be full of death and humiliation” (73). Her story begins with a blatant statement that she never met her family. Abandoned as a baby, she was raised by an abusive woman named Maria Dolores who also abandoned her to the streets at age 6 only to later reclaim her at 8 years old. The physical and psychological abuse Erika suffered would only worsen into a life of repeated sexual rape at Dolores’ house until she left for El Norte at 14. While Erika wonders “what it is to have normal sex” Martinez interrupts her narrative with an IMO agent’s insight about how the inaccuracy of sexual abuse statistics reveals the normalcy of the abuse and the loss of its terror. The stylistic practice that Martinez employs in which first hand narratives are fragmented by case studies and other expressions of authority disclose the pervasive forms of punitive measures that control and manipulate migrant sex workers. Women like Erika are intimidated into dependence on their captors and those who resemble the authors of their abuse, like Maria Dolores.

However, before Erika continues her story of suffering, Martinez makes another revealing statement. He claims, “There is, as Flores says, an expression for the transformation of the migrant’s body: *cuerpomatic*. The body becomes a credit card, a new platinum-edition “bodymatic” which buys you a little safety, a little bit of cash and the assurance that your travel buddies won’t get killed. Your bodymatic, except for what you get charged, buys a more comfortable ride on the train” (80). While Erika was not forcibly kidnapped or blatantly tricked into a life of prostitution, sexual exploitation and human trafficking collude at the site where vulnerability and illegality transform human beings into profitable cargo. *Cuerpomatic* emphasizes the moral compromise migrants face on their journey North; that is, in their forced complicity with law-breaking acts like illegal border crossing, migrants surrender to an economy of exchange where their bodies are rendered completely abject and illegible. Furthermore, the psychological trauma enacted by the moral quandary and helplessness they feel spirals into a communal relationship of abuse. Migrant women in Zonas de Tolerancia not only attempt to survive by claiming some sense of self-ownership, but also by subjecting other women to the hierarchy of sexual exploitation.

When Martinez speaks to Keny, a waitress at Calypso Cantina in Huixtla, her testimony follows a similar pattern: abandoned by her parents, Keny lived with abusive caretakers where she was beaten and molested. When she sought refuge with a sister who lived in Guatemala City, she was also brutally attacked and mutilated; so as a final resort and because the pay was better, she made her way to Huixtla. While she claims to simply dance for money, Keny articulates a sense of total submission that is exacerbated by the collective “stories of girls that have been sold.” In regards to the question, “Have you also come across girls who’ve been kidnapped and forced into prostitution?” she declares, “They’ve mostly been coming voluntarily. I’ve heard

stories of girls that have been sold, but once they see where they'll be working, they decide to stay put. They tell me they like the money" (85). Here, we identify the subtle deceit of human trafficking; the open secretiveness that Martinez claims structures modern day trafficking. By stating that "girls have been sold, but once they see where they'll be working, they decide to stay put," Keny repudiates notions of gendered helplessness, relating an ambiguous relationship to the shadow economy that is shared by many. Her story is a claim to the deceit in forced sex work insofar as the labor is forced, but the decision to stay resides with the individual. The lies that force women into precarious situations are disguised as business offers; if they like the money, they will stay. In the end, however, the consequence of "choosing" based on manipulation is the increasing creation of expendable bodies. Whether women like Keny stay or go, there will be other women readily available to supplement the exchange of flesh for money.

In the final installment of the chapter, Martinez meets yet another waitress at Calypso named Connie. Unlike Keny and Erika, Connie left Guatemala at the age of 15, fleeing the persistent gang violence that claimed the life of her brother as well as 15 other teenagers in her neighborhood. Martinez's interwoven comments in this interview with Connie, however, seem to be concerned with the silences that haunt Connie's answers. When it is time to leave, he states that Connie "answers a question I never asked but that she must have been wanting or expecting to hear" (86); she says, "I don't really get busy here anymore. I did it at first, but not anymore, I don't like it. And I don't plan to stay here. In a few weeks, I'm going to leave. My boyfriend says he's going to get me out of here once he has enough to provide for me and my family" (87). Key to this moment is Connie's struggle to assert her agency by claiming that she doesn't like working in Calypso anymore. Yet, her dependence on a boyfriend who will both save her from her labor and provide for their family exposes the interrelated order of the nation-state and

patriarchy. She is, on the one hand, a migrant woman rendered invisible by migration policies, and, on the other, dependent on the privileges men can bestow on her. Displacement and inequality are intrinsic to the success of a shadow economy dependent on legal articulations of power such as the nation-state. Connie does not need to be immediately threatened in the private sphere of the home to endure tremendous psychological abuse. In the normalcy of state induced and sanctioned violence, the nation as “home” becomes the surrogate abusive caretaker, exploiting and manipulating Connie into dependence.

As I have argued, representations of gendered violence in *The Beast* romanticize a violence that consigns women to passivity. However, I’d also like to consider the framing gestures Martinez uses to create a narrative of integration. While one may be tempted to interpret the statistics and footnotes provided as supplemental information that enhances the primary accounts of marginalized women, it is necessary to consider the ways in which such information shifts the authoritative voice. In describing the multitude of voices and bodies that cannot speak on their own, Martinez relies on empirical data to account for the truth of human trafficking. At one point, while describing the inadequate number of governmental agencies designed to combat trafficking, an anti-trafficking prosecutor tells him that it is impossible to identify just who is responsible for kidnappings. Martinez, however, replies “this last comment... I recognize as a flat lie... When we left the bar that day, the official told me that the owner of Las Nenitas was a well-known Zeta” (82).<sup>50</sup> In his conversations with authority figures like government agents, NGOs, as well as everyday people willing to talk to him, Martinez provides a collage of testimonies reframing and performing the very open secretiveness of the shadow economy in Mexico. The footnotes encourage us to follow Martinez in this ongoing project that is part of a

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<sup>50</sup> Los Zetas are one of Mexico’s most organized groups of drug traffickers that also generate profit off of human trafficking.

liberal human rights discourse. As readers, we are to continue the daunting task of asking questions and holding systems of power accountable for the lives enveloped in the shadows.

It is a difficult task to engage with the perverse and subtle ways economic and political forces dehumanize people. However, in stories such as these, we see the ways in which migrant women are excluded from human rights protections. Migrant women will labor in the hopes of a better life whether that life exists in El Norte, understood as the land of opportunities, or on the fringes of a different border. Yet, by encountering the uneasy and often-contradictory ways men and women like Erika, Keny, and Connie are described, we are tasked with transforming current definitions of belonging and, ultimately, called to rethink citizenship in ways that define personhood apart from the boundaries of the nation-state.

### **Shared Woundedness in *De Fronteras***

Popular images of Central American women resisting state and gendered violence often feature the figure of the guerrillera.<sup>51</sup> A female soldier dressed in camouflage and armed for warfare, her militant uniform becomes a necessary signifier of her identity as a revolutionary (Figure 3.1). To see and know the figure of the guerrillera is not only to identify an enemy of the state, but also to challenge the representation of women as merely domestic bodies, relegated to the margins of leftist revolutionary movements. The guerrillera asserts her position as a subversive body fighting for the people's liberation while simultaneously illustrating a transgressive relationship between normative masculinity and established power. The phallic gun and combative wardrobe allow her to co-opt masculine positions of authority and, by proxy, dislocate patriarchal notions of femininity. The guerrillera represents a particular kind of insubordinate woman, dressing and remaking her agency in the vestiges of patriarchal

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<sup>51</sup> See Viterna, Jocelyn. *Women in War: The Micro-processes of Mobilization in El Salvador*. 1st ed. N.p.: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.



Figure 3.1: FMLN Guerillera

dominance. Yet, how do we conceptualize the unregimented and naked female body? Are vulnerable women traveling across crime-ridden spaces armed with only photographs of their missing loved ones also revolutionary? What does Central American gendered resistance look like? Taking these questions into consideration, this section of the chapter will consider how the gendered violence represented in Claudia Hernández's collection of short stories, *De fronteras*, challenges the effects of postwar Central American violence and participates in a feminist praxis that can generate a "shared woundedness" or, as scholar Caroline Rodrigues claims, "a landscape of resisting bodies – places where bodies can take it all" (9).

In the penultimate story of *De fronteras*, "Mediodía de frontera," a vagrant dog in search of food wanders into a woman's public restroom located at an unspecified border. Upon entering, he finds a woman who has recently cut off her tongue as part of a suicide ritual: she wishes to hang herself, but does not want onlookers to be frightened or saddened by the sight of her protruding tongue. The dog narrates:



Ella, que sabe que él conoce las respuestas, no responde quién, sino por qué: porque los ahorcados no se ven mal porque cuelguen del techo, sino porque la lengua cuelga de ellos. Es la lengua lo que cause horror. La lengua es lo que provoca lastima. No el cuello. Sólo el forense presta atención al cuello. La gente común y corriente mira la lengua. Aunque se fija también un poco en los zapatos, es por la lengua que se estremece. Y ella no quiere horrorizar a nadie. Solo quiere ahorcarse. (102)<sup>52</sup>

While the passage is narrated in short, sincere, and candid terms, “[E]s la lengua lo que cause horror. La lengua es lo que provoca lastima. No el cuello,” the syntax itself materializes the mutilating effects of violence. The woman’s act of dismemberment and her subsequent suicide inscribe the body with a self-inflicted violence at the service of a collective “other” or rather of “[L]a gente común y corriente.” No longer a moment of self-possession, the mutilation of the woman’s tongue is an act of censorship in which we, both reader and onlookers, become participants in the normalization of gendered violence. Nonetheless, that the unnamed woman is concerned with the social perception of her body rather than the act of suicide itself suggests that death is also a way of displacing herself from a reality defined by violence, “ella no quiere horrorizar a nadie. Solo quiere ahorcarse.” The methodical and atypical construction of the woman’s suicide illustrates a self-determination that does not so much stand against violence as it complicates how subjects and bodies are dismembered by their social condition in El Salvador and by the impossibility of their own completeness.

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<sup>52</sup> My translation: “She, who understands that he knows the answers, does not reply who, but why: the hanged do not look bad because they hang from the ceiling, but rather because their tongues protrude. It’s the tongue that causes horror. The tongue that causes pity. Not the neck. Only the forensic scientist pays attention to the neck. Ordinary people look at the tongue. Although they notice the shoes as well, it’s the tongue that causes them to shudder. And she does not want to terrify anyone. She just wants to hang herself”

While the Salvadoran civil war that began in 1979 was formally terminated at the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992, the path to pacification did not mitigate the violence consuming a fragmented nation. The civil war produced the displacement of over two million people; a peace accords that called for the ceasefire between the FMLN guerrillas and the government but left many crimes unpunished; and a social milieu that saw the graphic dismemberment of both individual bodies and the country's political infrastructure. For those who experienced the war firsthand and those born in a postwar El Salvador, a problematic relationship emerges between remembering the atrocities of war while simultaneously forging a peace that relies on forgetting. Moreover, the social issues that catapulted the bloody civil war were left unresolved by leaders of the peace process. The emergence of transnational gangs in El Salvador during the mid-1990s alongside the high levels of poverty and crime that still plague the country have shifted the violence perpetuated by war into violence perpetuated by structural inequality. Today, the compounded reality of economic instability and high homicide rates mark El Salvador as one of the most violent nations in the world for a country not at war. Of course, there is a direct legacy between the unacknowledged costs of the brutal civil war and the current decaying of social order.<sup>53</sup> Thus, for a writer like Claudia Hernández who grew up in a war-ridden El Salvador and now lives its aftermath, violence has become a norm that she must not only contend with, but must also live with, interact with, and interpret.

If we understand that the woman in “Mediodía de frontera” is metaphorically dismembered by her social condition, then it is also important to note that the story takes place in a public border restroom. The space of death is located at the fringes of the public and private

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<sup>53</sup> See Silber, Irina Carlota. *Everyday Revolutionaries: Gender, Violence, and Disillusionment in Postwar El Salvador*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2011. Print.; Rivas, Cecilia M. *Salvadoran Imaginaries: Mediated Identities and Cultures of Consumption*. N.p.: Rutgers UP, 2014. Print.; and Moodie, Ellen. *El Salvador in the Aftermath of Peace: Crime, Uncertainty, and the Transition to Democracy*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2010. Print.

sphere. While the woman is concerned with the inevitable public spectacle of her dead body, her intention is to occupy a space that offers her privacy, a space wherein she may carry out her own death. Yet, to be at a border is to be in a place that demarcates what belongs and doesn't belong, and thus to inhabit a space of conflict. Moreover, by locating the suicide in a place of transit and transforming the border restroom into a spectacle of death, Hernández highlights both the transitional state between life and death, and alludes to a postwar violence that has overtaken Salvadoran society.

*De fronteras* is a collection of short stories that uses elements of the absurd and surreal to explore a violent and dehumanizing Salvadoran reality.<sup>54</sup> But some stories are also told in a sober and comical manner. The sharp contrast between genre and tone places the collection, as the title suggests, at the boundaries of narrative differences, making visible the shared realities between gendered violence and a violent postwar El Salvador. Indeed, at the core of the collection is a desire to critique the political and social evasion of accountability that informed the peace accords and led to a festering social order. Composed of sixteen stories, the characters we encounter are human bodies or animals, living and dead; deformed; handicapped; mutilated; and dismembered by a routine violence that has become naturalized. For Hernández, these incomplete bodies become the visible and quotidian effects of a postwar society that saw the explosion of crime rates and the growth of transnational gangs. They represent the (ir)resolution of wartime violence insofar as they re-member the sufferings of the past and call attention to the silences that inform it.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Craft, Linda J. "Viajes fantásticos: Cuentos de [in]migración e imaginación de Claudia Hernández." *Revista Iberoamericana* 242 (2013): 181-194.

<sup>55</sup> Kokotovic, Misha. "Telling Evasions: Postwar El Salvador in the Short Fiction of Claudia Hernández." *A Contracorriente*, 2014. Web. 10 July 2016.

In the short story, “Hechos de un buen ciudadano (parte 1),” (“Acts of a good citizen (part 1)”) an unnamed man arrives home to find a dead woman’s body in his kitchen. Instantly and because he claims to be like any “good citizen,” the man places a search ad in the local newspaper stating, “[B]usco dueño de un cadáver de muchacha joven de carnes rollizas, rodillas saltonas y cara de llamarse Lívida” (17).<sup>56</sup> Four people then call: first, a man calls in search of deceased family member whose funeral has been suspended because the body is missing; second, a woman calls to congratulate him for being “un buen ciudadano”; third, a man from the department of health and sanitation calls to inquire if he has followed sanitation protocol to prevent the spread of disease; and finally, an elderly couple calls in search of their missing daughter, Lívida, who fits the cadaver’s description, but whom they claim is alive not dead. When no one claims the body in his kitchen, the narrator decides to offer the cadaver to the first caller instead of the elderly couple, stating “me pareció que seria cruel hacerles perder la Fe en que Lívida estuviera respirando aun” (19).<sup>57</sup> In the process of narrating a story that begins with altruistic intentions and ends in deceit, the unnamed man displaces the notion that the ritual of mourning necessarily begets closure. By giving the body to the first caller, he exposes how the act of mourning is the acceptance of an absence, yet cynically subverts the idea that the loss or absence is irreplaceable.

Nonetheless, it is the unknown fate of the elderly couple’s Lívida that symbolically repositions the past in the present and creates a moment of shared woundedness. It is important to note that the murdered female body cannot be accounted for both at the beginning of the story nor at the end when the narrator refuses to offer the cadaver to the elderly couple. He is, as a good citizen, the harbor of peace and knowledge, becoming literally responsible for the

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<sup>56</sup> My translation: “I am looking for the owner of a plump young woman’s cadaver who has prominent knees and a face that one would name Lívida”

<sup>57</sup> My translation: “I thought it would be too cruel to make them lose faith that Lívida would still be alive”

sanitation and well being of the public body. He is asked to prepare the space of death, to inoculate it from harmful viruses, and thus symbolically to save the public from a traumatic encounter with violence. Yet, it is his desire to help the couple maintain hope that Lívica could be alive that actually becomes a form of remembrance. In the suspension of the couple's mourning, the present is momentarily freed of a past violence and left undefined. The story of the woman's fate is not a story of reconciliation and restitution although the narrator seeks to unite the body with its loved ones, but rather is a story about the accumulation of loss, of absence that is left unaccounted for, and of missing bodies that cannot be replaced. While Hernández's stories demonstrate a perverse and cynical approach to death and violence, they also highlight the ways in which the living maintain the presence of unaccountable loss and in doing so keep the past in present memory. They do not labor against death and violence, but rather, as scholar Emanuela Jossa states, "inventan otros modos de estar en la colectividad, más allá de la homologación... se abren a otras posibilidades" (14).<sup>58</sup>

In her explorations of the ways death, absence, and violence foment moments of relationality between human beings (and non-humans), Hernández ends *De fronteras* with a story that challenges normative acts of mourning and refashions the fragmented body as a refusal to spectacularize violence. "Manual del hijo muerto," unlike the other short stories, is written in the form of an instruction manual providing instructions on how to reassemble a recovered, but dismembered child's body. Written in the second person, Hernández begins the story with cautionary warnings that consider the parent's emotional distress at having to piece together a child's body and advise against beginning the reassembly without verifying that body in question belongs to the son or daughter. Unlike the ancillary information that informs Martínez's

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<sup>58</sup> My translation: "they invent alternative ways of being in a collective, further away from homologation... they open up to other possibilities"

footnotes, Hernández's warnings serve as moments that provide the reader with a supplemental understanding of how bodies are regulated by birth-family kinship. For example, she states in the "Atencion" box at the bottom of the first page, "[A]segúrese, también, de no firmar de recibido antes de estar completamente seguro (a) de que el contenido del paquete le pertenece en su totalidad. Recuerde que no se aceptan devoluciones" (107).<sup>59</sup> By narrating the return of the body as a product delivery, Hernandez engenders a language of commodification that negates the traumatic encounter of any sentiments. Indeed, she reminds us that returns are not allowed, "no se aceptan devoluciones," in order to illustrate how kinship bonds normalize mourning or grief. What is left outside the normative rites of grievances is the ability to create alternative forms of belonging and relationality. Thus, the dismembered son becomes a metaphor for the disjointed body politic of El Salvador that cannot be healed or refashioned without paying attention to the social norms that foreclose shared traumas and collective mourning.

Yet, "Manual de un hijo muerto" subverts its own authoritative force by shifting the story's somber reflection on the way violence displaces families into an account focused on the mutilated body as a site of integration. For example, when instructing the parent on how to sew different body parts together, Hernandez writes, "únalas mediante costuras desde, por lo menos, dos centímetros antes de las bordes, para evitar que se desgarren las partes cuando se transporte o abrace si ocurre un arrebato de dolor" (108).<sup>60</sup> By claiming that the parent must begin sewing two inches above the fringes of individual parts so as not to rip the body when overcome by a sudden desire to embrace the son or daughter, Hernandez asserts that an engagement with a

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<sup>59</sup> My translation: "Make sure, too, of not signing a receipt of delivery before making sure that the content of your package belongs to you in its entirety. Remember that returns are not accepted"

<sup>60</sup> My translation: "join them by the seams from at least two centimeters before the edges, to avoid tearing the parts when transporting or hugging if there is an outburst of pain"

recovered dismembered body is not an unemotional and sanitized task often carried out by figures like forensic scientists. Instead, the act of re-membering is invested with emotional memory and the personal affective relationships that inform accountability. For Hernandez, to restore the body is to neither memorialize the recovered son or daughter nor fulfill promises of closure, but rather to make manifest how loss is a shared experience, one that allows us to move beyond liberal notions of human dignity that deprive certain bodies from human rights protection.

### **Re-presenting Resistance as a Sensorial Experience**

In 2006, a group of Central Americans, organized by the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement, began annual caravan trips across Mexico to find missing loved ones.<sup>61</sup> Assembled primarily of women, the trips, known as the Caravan of Mothers of Disappeared Migrants, are desperate attempts by Central American mothers to reunite with loved ones who have journeyed through parts of Mexico long plagued by violence from the transnational gangs who prey on migrants, these migrants also endure the abuses by law officials who do the same. While there are no exact numbers showing how many migrants are disappeared, the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement estimates that between 70,000 to 120,000 people disappear each year en route to the U.S.<sup>62</sup> And yet these alarmingly large numbers of disappearances bear no official weight insofar as the Mexican government does not track migrants nor provide a way to document their disappearance. Because the Mexican government has little interest in finding and protecting migrants, organizations like the Caravan of Mothers have turned to civil society to help with the task. This type of activism mirrors various grassroots efforts in Mexico that have bypassed

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<sup>61</sup>. "Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano." N.p., n.d. Web.  
<https://movimientomigrantemesoamericano.org/>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid



Figure 3.2: Caravan of Mothers

negotiations with the government and initiated autonomous search committees. Communal organizations like Caravan of Mothers demonstrate that when the state refuses to find the thousands of people disappeared within its own borders, civil society can take up the cause.

The violence that generates present day disappearances flourishes because of the migrant's precarious sense of belonging. The migrant's experience of violence can be read as a particular technique of subjugation where lack of legal papers make the migrant invisible to methods of accountability like government databases. Yet, the concept of "illegality" binds the migrant to a world outside of law and order, simultaneously criminalizing a vulnerable group of people and exposing them to serious violations of basic human rights. If the migrant is a nonexistent figure in Mexico's legal systems of accountability and protection, Caravan of Mothers creates alternative spaces of and for belonging. As public displays of affection and accountability, family members wear the photographic images of disappeared young men and women around their necks as they walk the train tracks that function as migratory routes (Figure 3.2). Here, the faces of missing loved ones appear in a transitory public space, making a



vulnerable class of people visible to a larger public. The women are charged with the task of displaying what is unseen; or rather to make public the lives that are unrepresentable in technologies of documentation. Their personal bodies serve as canvases in order to reconstruct belonging as an act of defiance against the bureaucratic systems that try to redefine membership but that ultimately reinforce disappearances. Far from enlisting the help of the government or law enforcement, the Caravan of Mothers populates public spaces with traveling women and another kind of population entirely, generating a new politics of resistance.

Using a different artistic method, the Guatemalan poet, blogger, and performance artist Regina José Galindo also engages with the female body as a central concept of resistance. However, Galindo's focus is on object female bodies that are considered grotesque in nature. Her art prioritizes an aesthetic that considers how the Guatemalan female body, in particular, has been subjected to violence at public and private levels. While I will only be discussing three of her most famous performance pieces, Galindo's work as a whole challenges a socio-political Guatemalan context that is highly repressive while simultaneously interrogating the "systems of power that date back to colonial times – church domination, imperialism and neoimperialism, political oligarchy and dictatorship... sexism and racism."<sup>63</sup> Regina Galindo's own petite body becomes a testament to the ways in which the female body has become a site for intervention, modification, and transformation.

Guatemala's civil war, unlike El Salvador's, was a thirty-six year clandestine confrontation between the state and leftist parties that began in 1960 and ended with peace accords in 1996. While the war is now widely acknowledged as genocide against the Indigenous population of Guatemala, the government has not presented formal plans for reparations nor

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<sup>63</sup> See "Unimagined Communities" by Diana Taylor and Roselyn Constantino in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*. This statement is in response to a contemporary tradition of Latin American performances that engages with a hemispheric legacy of colonial oppression.

established a strong political support for social justice. At the moment, courts are retrying former President Rios-Montt for the mass killing and forced disappearances of more than 1,700 indigenous Ixil Maya during his rule in 1982-83.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, because the war was a movement against the peasant Ladino population and rebel Mayan leaders, violence and intimidation by the state continue to be a major problem for Guatemala's rural communities. Military leaders operate with relative impunity, and organized crime has destabilized the pacification process begun twenty years ago. Consequently, radical artists like Regina Galindo demand state accountability by making visible the graphic violence that has been silenced by government forces and court proceedings.

Born in 1974 in Guatemala City, Galindo's artistic identity was informed by the social injustices that plagued postwar Guatemala. She describes herself as "a visual artist specializing in performance art. Her work explores the universal ethical implications of social injustices related to racial, gender and other abuses involved in the unequal power relations that work in our current society" ([reginajosegalindo.com](http://reginajosegalindo.com)).<sup>65</sup> Certainly, what has won Galindo many prestigious international awards is her ability to utilize, maneuver, and expose her body for the sake of raising public awareness of the "unequal power relations that work in our society." At times, she carves misogynistic and demeaning words unto her legs in a live performance, and, at other moments, stands idly in a room while a bucket of pig's blood is poured over her naked body. Yet, it is precisely because she shifts the personal into a public discourse and experience

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<sup>64</sup>This yearlong event is commonly referred to as the "Scorched Earth Campaign." See Jordison, Sasha Maldonado. "Guatemala on Trial Rios Montt Genocide Trial: An Observer's Perspective." *Connecticut Journal of International Law* 30.1 (2014): 53-92.

<sup>65</sup> My translation. Original quote in Spanish: "Es una artista visual especializada en performance art. Su trabajo explora las implicaciones éticas universales de las injusticias sociales, relacionadas con discriminaciones raciales, de género y otros abusos implicados en las desiguales relaciones de poder que funcionan en nuestras sociedad actuales."

that I argue her art reflects “the ethical implications of social justices” beyond the visual. In her work, the marginalized, oppressed, and absent are rendered visible not just through the representation of the body, but also by a sensorial experience of the art/female body that generates a collective affective response. In what follows, I analyze how the public’s interpellation into her performance pieces, such as in the washing of mud from Galindo’s body, allows us to discover other ways of sensing the effects of unequal power relations. Much like Hernandez’s “Manual de un hijo,” Galindo’s art challenges the anesthetized engagements with bodies that too often define how institutions of power represent marginalized bodies. In the care for the abject female body, Galindo validates Elizabeth Anker’s argument that our discourse and practice of human rights should not be indebted to the notion of a whole, rational body, but rather one that intertwines various corporeal experiences.



Figure 3.3: Recorte por la línea

In the first two performance pieces titled, “Recorte por la línea, (cut along the line),” and “Himenoplastia,” Galindo’s body confronts the patriarchal and sexual norms that use medical interventions to reduce female bodies to mere objects. The video performances call attention to medical procedures of removal (incision, cutting, reduction) and reconstruction in order to illustrate a body susceptible to power, subjugated and industrialized by marked “components” that can be altered or removed. Images of “Recorte por la línea” (Figure 3.3) show the artist’s marked body on public display demonstrating the way in which a male dominated society, represented by the doctor, seeks to have control over women’s bodies by marking and thus containing a body that is considered excessive and grotesque. Yet, the outcome of this piece is a distorted image of an idealized body. The marked outlines represent the boundaries of idyllic beauty standards, while making visible the unachievable nature of body reconstruction surgery.

Here, the abject becomes the methods of domination used by the plastic surgery industry rather than the supposedly imperfect female body. The markings move beyond the visual, evoking feelings of shock and empathy through the tactility of the doctor's hands.

“Himenoplastia” (Figure 3.4) likewise blurs the divisions between what is considered abject and grotesque. This performance piece, unlike “Recorte por la linea,” was not executed in a public space, but rather was privately videotaped as Galindo submitted herself to hymen reconstruction surgery at a clandestine clinic in Guatemala. The dangerous operation is a common practice in Guatemala intended to facilitate respectable marriages and social recognition by restoring a woman's virginity. However, by making the surgery a performance piece, Galindo suggests that despite the imposing social norms that aim to contain women and female sexuality, the female body is uncontainable. In Figure 3.4, bodily fluids exceed the body's natural boundaries. Blood and other visceral fluids seep out of the vagina and stain the white sterile sheets covering Galindo's body. It is an image that confronts the viewer with an

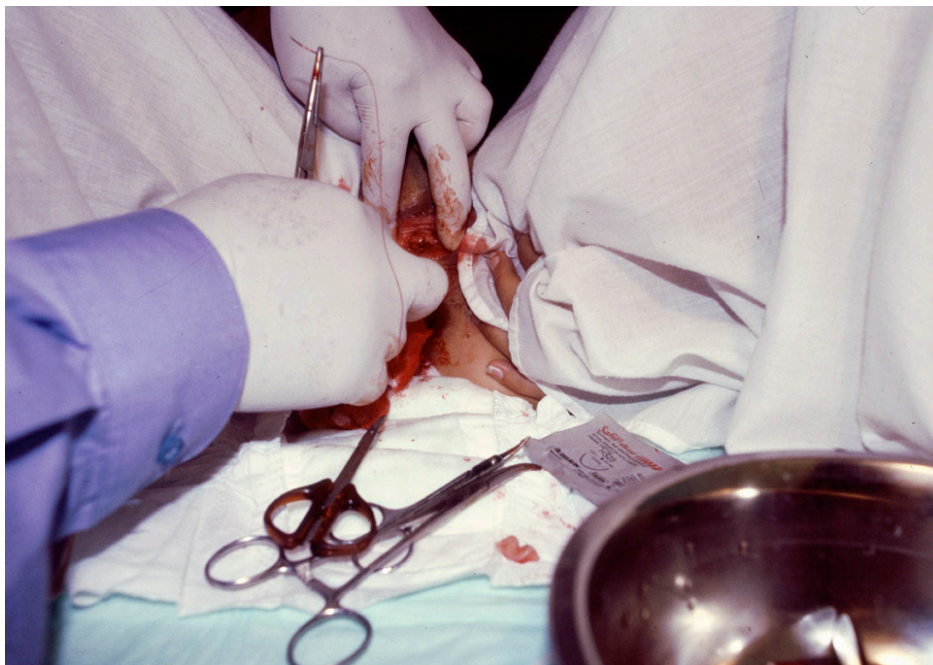


Figure 3.4: Himenoplastia

abject body, the unrestrained woman in need of virginal restoration, but also with the horrors of a procedure that produces the presence of grotesque bodily fluids. Unable to look away, we identify and sympathize with the performer because Galindo speaks to all that is “unspeakable” and thus repressive to women in Guatemala who are constantly pressured into conforming to social standards of purity. Indeed, Himenoplastia performs an archiving of sorts, not just through the video recording of the procedure, but also through a sensorial experience of history. The oozing blood, not the reattached hymen, is the common experience of surgical practices that repress female bodies.

Nonetheless, Galindo’s performances manifest how the female body is both a space of resistance and a resistance to the space of violence. In Figure 3.5, titled, “Mientras, ellos siguen libres (meanwhile, they remain free),” which she performed while 8 months pregnant at the Casa de los Correos in Guatemala City, Galindo had her hands and feet bound by umbilical cords while she lay naked tied to the bars of a bed. The piece is a re-enactment and commentary on a technique of restraint used by the Guatemalan national army during the late twentieth century civil war. It was a technique not only used as a method of domination over the female body, but also a strategy to induce miscarriages through multiple rapes, aimed, in particular, at the suppression of the indigenous population. Because the performance, like the previous two, demands the execution of violent practices on a live body, Galindo’s work is a disturbing act to witness. As illustrated by the picture, the exposed pregnant body in performance reconstructs the space of death and torture into a space where power relations shift. That is, if the army exposed the vulnerable female body in order to destroy it, Galindo makes the naked body present in order to



Figure 3.5: Mientras, ellos siguen libre

place it in resistance to the space and methods of domination. She exposes the automated nature of state sponsored rape, forcing us to accept the abjection of the female body as a shared space and effectively transforming our role as passive spectators into active witnesses.

If Galindo's performances are witnessed without knowledge of the socio-political context that drives their meanings, the audience may not connect the work to a legacy of violence that still plagues Guatemalan society. Consequently, it is important to note the anecdotes and explanations that accompany Galindo's work and provide the public with a different body to consider: the body of the text. Now, I have summarized the historical context that informs "mientras, ellos siguen libres," but Galindo also complements the museum-based performance with an explanation that states, "[C]on ocho meses de embarazo, permanezco atada a una cama-catre, con cordones umbilicales reales, de la misma forma que las mujeres indígenas,

embarazadas, eran amarradas para ser posteriormente violadas durante el conflicto armado en Guatemala” (reginagalindo.com).<sup>66</sup> Both text and visual serve as powerful tools to explore the nature of the Guatemalan nation when such tools are associated with systematic violence. In a space like the museum, the female body and body of the text disrupt processes of memorialization that sanitize history. Thus, both the discursive and material bodies represent sites of tension and ambiguity, oscillating between presenting the usually positive images of umbilical chords and motherhood, and their explanation as sources of violence. In this performance piece, excessive violence and bodies both frame and oversaturate the performance. Art transforms into a political device and at the core of Galindo’s performances is the notion that bodies can also become spaces for collecting techniques of transgression.

In an interview with *El Pais* in 2012, Galindo was asked why her performance pieces never make explicit accusations or place blame, she replied, “I don’t believe in moral discourses, nor that art can save the world. But I do believe that images have the ability to shake silence” (Molina).<sup>67</sup> By focusing on images, rather than art, and a desire to “shake silence” rather than engage in moral discourses, Galindo embraces the fleeting and ephemeral forms of representation that are often left out of institutions like museums. Accordingly, Galindo is both aware of and consciously exposing the inherent contradictions that museums engender for performance artists. Her labor moves within the confines of the museum in order to both undermine traditional forms of visual representation and to “shake silence” by embodying the inconsistencies that the museum effaces or overlooks. In one of the most empathetic live performances Galindo has ever performed,

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<sup>66</sup> My translation: “During the eighth month of my pregnancy, I am tied to a bed-cot, with real umbilical chords, in the same way that indigenous women, pregnant, were tied to be subsequently raped during the armed conflict of Guatemala.”

<sup>67</sup> My translation. Original in Spanish: “no creo en los discursos morales, ni que el arte pueda salvar el mundo. Pero si en la posibilidad de que las imagines puedan hacer tambalear el silencio”



titled, “Alud,” the artist is covered in mud and lies on a metal gurney. The gurney is stationed inside a museum where a spectating and passive public is asked to take action and clean the body (Figure 3.6). While most of Galindo’s work powerfully calls attention to the disappeared or maimed female body by focusing on the visual representation of the vulnerable body, this piece suggests that the body stores affective attachments. On a political level, the texture and touch of mud alludes to the bodies that have been buried and hidden in clandestine gravesites. While the



Figure 3.6: Alud

care of the body vis-à-vis the use of the wet white cloth suggests that in cleansing the body, the nameless and forgotten from other places and other times enter the space of the museum, underscoring the limits of a visual space that claims to produce truth. The textual aspect of the performance escapes the codifying practices of museums and demands that we bear witness to oppression in ways that go beyond visual representation.

Resistance to gendered violence manifests itself in a myriad ways across transnational boundaries. In the Latin American guerrillera, we find an important iconic figure that embodies revolution and resistance as anti-normative and anti-feminine. She not only complicates static gender norms, but also manifests her prowess through the re-appropriation of popular military tropes related to various luchas. However, as I have attempted to articulate, the female body, even at its most fragile and battered state, is also capable of leading revolutionary movements and resistance, of redefining identity within spaces of incompleteness that often efface certain groups of people. From the grassroots efforts of Central American women traveling by bus through Mexico to the work of a Guatemalan female artist, women challenge the oppressive forces and technologies of power that threaten to destroy human life. While in Claudia Hernandez's "Hechos de un buen ciudadano (parte 1)," the appearance of a dead female body in the home of a good citizen is embraced as a normal, albeit titillating, incident that comically and frightfully blurs the lines between what's real and what's possible, the reader is left to examine a world in which the public space of violence invades and rests within the private space of the home. And yet it is Hernandez's embrace of the hyperbolic, surreal and macabre that ironically refuses to normalize postwar violence in El Salvador. Through their art and labor of love, Central American women at home and abroad rupture social expectations and the oppressive forces that have normalized violence across the Isthmus. Their revolution, I argue, is in the everyday struggle to invent new spaces of collective belonging.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**When Geographies Move: Mapping a Decolonial Practice of Relationality in Transnational Latino/a/x Narratives**

We are all wounded, but we can connect through the wound that alienated us from others. When the wound forms a cicatriz, the scar can become a bridge linking people who have been split apart  
 – Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called my Back*

'Home' can be unsafe and dangerous because it bears the likelihood of intimacy and thus thinner boundaries. Staying 'home' and not venturing out from our group comes from woundedness, and stagnates our growth. To bridge means loosening our borders, not closing off to others. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without  
 – Gloria Anzaldúa, *this bridge we call home*

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that liberal human rights discourses, practices, and norms have influenced many institutionalized recovery efforts in Central America. The search for missing bodies or enforced disappearances is an attempt to hold states accountable for their egregious crimes and provide restitution for victims of violence. But in following a human rights paradigm that relies on what Elizabeth Anker calls “the historical rhetoric of empire” (47), formal practices of recovery like truth commissions and state archives invoke claims to a higher moral ground that is premised on a savior/victim paradigm. The Global South is represented as a space of perpetual violence, consistently requiring Western intervention, while perpetrators of violence that threaten democratic values and nation-state sovereignty, like indigenous activists and migrant prostitutes, fall outside the scope of victimhood into the domain of the irredeemable other. Humanitarianism sensationalizes human rights abuses and reifies the Isthmus, in particular, as regressive, or, as overrun by sociopolitical failures. Nevertheless, the task of recovering the missing is a process that develops at various levels of organizing and collective activism, and while I have been critical of formal institutions that are given hegemonic control over such practices, it is important to consider how others move against and through notions of

recovery to engage with forms of accountability. In doing so, we can begin the necessary task of developing what Nelson Maldonado-Torres calls a decolonial attitude.<sup>68</sup> That is, of moving into a space of being and thinking that “can become a bridge linking people who have been split apart” (2).

An increasingly popular branch of human rights work today is the development of forensic science to identify remains and provide scientific evidence against varying forms of violence. From the exhumation of mass graves in Central America to the identification of remains found in scattered burial plots along the Central America-Mexico-US corridor, forensics anthropologists and archeologists are tasked with the job of supplementing state work. They provide evidence of human rights violations in legal proceedings for social justice and help reconstruct historical memory insofar as the identification of lost remains engages in an alternative understanding of the recent past. In fact, one of the first forensics teams in the world to produce evidence of state-sanctioned human rights abuses was the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF).<sup>69</sup> The multidisciplinary group was created in 1984 to investigate the forced disappearances of Argentines during the country’s military dictatorship (1976-1983), but have since expanded field work to “nearly thirty countries throughout the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Europe” (“History of EAAF”). One of their most intriguing projects and the one I will discuss here is the Border Project initiated in 2009 by EAAF co-founder Mercedes

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<sup>68</sup> In the introduction to “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn,” Nelson Maldonado-Torres claims that the “decolonial turn is anchored in specific forms of skepticism and epistemic attitudes out of which certain critical questions and the search for answers are generated” (1). Thus, to possess a decolonial attitude is to not only question the ways coloniality affects our lived experiences, but also to “search for answers”, to find our common bridges.

<sup>69</sup> Alonso, A. D. & Galbraith, P. D. & Nienass, B. "Bringing the Dead Back into Society: An Interview with Mercedes Doretti." *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 83 no. 2, 2016, pp. 511-534. *Project MUSE*, [muse.jhu.edu/article/631171](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/631171).

Doretti. The project is a transnational and multi-organizational attempt to produce a regional U.S.-Mexico-Central America forensics database system that centralizes information about missing migrants and unidentified remains. It is both a response to the systematic inefficiencies between medical examiners' offices, prosecutors' offices, and federal agencies, as well as a way of renegotiating a shared responsibility to the families of disappeared migrants.

Before the inception of the Border Project, the Pima County Missing Migrants Project (PCMMP) was created in 2006 as an effort to organize data about missing migrants reported across Southern Arizona.<sup>70</sup> The nonprofit's work is one of the first large-scale attempts to provide families of missing migrants access to search agencies. And although their stated mission is to bridge "the data gap that exists between medical examiners and families of the missing" ("The Missing Migrant Project"), the distribution of information is inconsistently shared. For instance, while the Pima County Medical Examiner's office is equipped and willing to enter information about unidentified remains into a national database called the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), the database isn't able to match unidentified remains with a missing person's report unless information is catalogued for both.<sup>71</sup> The procedures for reporting and inputting a missing migrant's information into NamUs requires a police tracking number and such documentation goes beyond the jurisdiction of local police agencies since missing migrants are considered foreign nationals. To locate missing people at the liminal site of the U.S.-Mexico border is to engage in a practice of recovery thwarted by fundamental notions of citizenship and national belonging. Thus, for Central American migrants,

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<sup>70</sup> Today, the PCMMP is housed in the Colibri Center for Human Rights continuing the same family advocacy work necessary to bridge data gap between medical examiners offices and families of the disappeared.

<sup>71</sup> Reineke, Robin. *Lost in the System: Unidentified Bodies on the Border*. NACLA, 6 Aug. 2013, [nacla.org/news/2013/8/6/lost-system-unidentified-bodies-border](http://nacla.org/news/2013/8/6/lost-system-unidentified-bodies-border).

in particular, such legal and sociopolitical displacements intensify in the crossing of two nation-state borders wherein even fewer resources are available for tracking migrants. Border projects like PCMMP expose the legal obstacles that limit how organizations account for the missing, and reveal that where and when people disappear within the threshold of national boundaries is not easily identified or documented.

In “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom,” Walter D. Mignolo argues that in order to engage in a de-colonial option of knowledge production in which marginalized subjects of the Third World shift Eurocentric parameters of knowing (who knows vs. who is known), one must engage in “epistemic disobedience” (15). The act of “epistemic disobedience” allows marginalized subjects to engage in “knowledge-making” for the advancement and betterment of their own lives instead of advancing Western forms of knowledge production. In particular, Mignolo calls into question scholarly disciplines like Anthropology that have largely viewed the Third World as a space and concept to be known rather than as spaces of knowledge making.<sup>72</sup> In order to de-colonize knowledge production, we must shift the “geography of reason” wherein Western forms of knowledge-making rooted in imperial/colonial purposes no longer control how knowledge is valued, disavowed, or remade. This call to move away from Eurocentric ways of thinking in order to incorporate knowledge from below is at play in the labor of forensic anthropologists. While institutional and judicial forms of accounting for the missing restrict the effectiveness of search agencies and organizations like PCMMP, forensic anthropologists and medical teams have worked hand in hand with grassroots activists and local people to not only find the missing, but also to shift the boundaries of knowledge-making and engage in epistemic disobedience.

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<sup>72</sup> Mignolo, 14

In a 2016 interview with scholars from multiple disciplines, Mercedes Doretti addressed the successes and limits of the Border Project for addressing the bureaucratic hurdles that influence forensics work. She claims,

First of all, there is no general system to deal with issues of missing migrants.

There is not even a regional database on missing migrants with names or any kind of forensic information, least of all genetic information on missing migrants.

When we first started our work, there were national efforts to document missing persons in some countries, but they were generally not geared towards migrants, and they are either inaccessible or incomplete. In other countries there was not even a national database. Without those mechanisms in place it is very hard to provide a clear answer to families of missing migrants. (513)

Insofar as the EEAF's work began as a response to the disappearance of Argentineans during the country's military dictatorship, the Border Project's transnational focus shifts its labor from a static, scientific mission to identify remains towards a coalescing effort to document the missing *person*, from the gathering of "genetic information" to the necessary creation of databases that narrate a missing person's status. Moreover, by claiming that there aren't mechanisms in place that "provide a clear answer to families of missing migrants," Doretti reframes the purpose of the Border Project: the answer(s) to be found go beyond the genetic makeup of remains or the empirical truth claims of legal discourse and center instead on an ethical shared responsibility to the families of the missing migrants.

At the same time as the Border Project acknowledges a shared responsibility to the families, its grassroots labor is a practice of Mignolo's "epistemic disobedience." For instance, the lack of coordination between search agencies and medical-legal organizations compels

Doretti's team of forensic scientists to rely on the testimonies of grave keepers. Here, the interaction with local people helps narrate the social story of a specific place, and, ultimately, highlights the ways academic disciplines and institutions of power can incorporate the memories of excluded bodies in the search for missing people. Doretti explains,

The way of looking for them as a forensic team was to search in the cemeteries and at the borders, and in the burial grounds along the train. Tapachula was the beginning of that project. We did some research with the local partners, especially with the organization *Voces Mesoamericanas*, on the Tapachula cemetery. We found that the remains, for the most part, were not buried in individual graves; bodies were on top of one another. They were not even buried within the grid of the cemetery but underneath the paths and between the other graves. They were almost invisible and there were no records of their location. Knowledge about their location largely depended on the memory of the cemetery keepers. (514)

The Tapachula cemetery's layout departs from dominant understandings of cemeteries as sites of ritualized mourning and identification. According to Julie Rugg's "Defining the place of burial: what makes a cemetery a cemetery?", one important feature of cemeteries is that they "offer the possibility of, and a context for, memorializing a particular individual: the identity of the deceased can be *enshrined in the site's internal order*. Implicit in the landscaping of a cemetery is the ability of users to locate a specific grave" (my emphasis, 262). Yet, the Tapachula cemetery offers an alternative understanding of memorialization. On the one hand, rather than adhere to an "internal order" that demarcates a specific grave, Tapachula is constructed by the memory of cemetery keepers, a labor that shifts memorialization away from spatial markers (i.e. tombstones) and repositions it within ephemeral social relationships. On the other hand, the fact



that bodies “were not even buried within the grid of the cemetery” challenges the spatial and historical importance of cemetery grids. Tapachula is not a protected or respected site of interment where an individual’s identity is “enshrined,” rather the cemetery is a space where violence and murder are laid to rest and forgotten. Cemetery keepers then become guardians of memories that refuse to surrender Tapachula’s incongruous landscape to romanticized notions of memorialization and sacredness.

Undeniably, Doretta and her team of forensics anthropologists understand that in attempting to account for missing migrants across different spaces, they must contend with a various shifting boundaries. In what follows, I will center my analysis of decolonial practices of relationality on Glissant’s idea of a “relational poetics”, and the concept of “border thinking”, as developed by Gloria Anzaldúa. The first half of the chapter will challenge the idea that Central Americans have only recently begun to immigrate to the United States.<sup>73</sup> During the Chicano/a civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, as war fleeing Central American migrants were beginning to make their way to the U.S., a San Francisco-based collective called, “El Pocho-Che”, attempted to articulate an understanding of *Latinidad* that acknowledged differences without universalizing experiences. Accordingly, I will consider how their literary and cultural work narrates a series of cultural, social, and legal entanglements.... In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that the creative work at hand is limiting or provides a sense of hopelessness for the disenfranchised, but rather the texts and images I read present us with difficult narratives engaging in decolonial thinking. They are wrought with contradictions and preclude a politics of representation that is orderly, foregoing a set of literary practices that

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<sup>73</sup> Conversations about the recent Central American migrant children crisis have begun distinguishing the different period of Central American immigration to the U.S. While the mass migration of people during the 1980s civil wars is most known, this current influx of child migrants is considered the second mass exodus of Central Americans due to civil unrest spawned by U.S. imperialist intervention in the Isthmus.

homogenize Latinidad and thus erase a Central American presence in the U.S.. Because violence and power are relational, the texts struggle to liberate marginalized subjects from the multiple displacements generated by imperialist practices. Nonetheless, these narratives must be embraced for the inconsistencies that inform such a task because by failing to comply with normative ideas of progress they reveal the violence experienced by oppressed groups.

The second half of this chapter will then shift into a study of digital civil disobedience at the U.S.-Mexico border. Working with a cyberactivist collective called, the Electronic Disturbance Theatre, I will argue that while the collective specialized in a form of hactivism that floods access to government websites with experimental poetry, their radical Transborder Immigrant Tool, defunded in 2011, reimagines a new practice of relationality. Using GPS (Geo Poetic System) technology, the T.I.T. poeticized the Sonoran desert landscape in order to lead lost migrants to water sources. The tool's purpose is to distribute life saving information that transforms the status of migrants from opaque bodies devoid of legal personhood to translucent figures. This claim to translucency acknowledges the ways natural landmarks account and provide for those missing bodies wandering the desolate desert. If the purpose of recovery is to enact a return to normative states of being or belonging, and if the historical violence of border crossing and forced migrations precludes such promises of return, the T.I.T. is a decolonial practice that remaps the lost migrant and his/her personhood unto a landscape of possibility.

### **A Relational Poetics and the Performance of a Pan-Latino/a Diaspora**

The historical presence of Central American people in the U.S. has been a longstanding, although largely understudied fact.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, contemporary scholarship that explores the

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<sup>74</sup> For recent work on the historical presence of Central Americans in the U.S. during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Kirsten Silva Gruesz's writing on hemispheric relations: "The Gulf of Mexico System and the "Latinness" of New Orleans", *American Literary History*, 2006; "The Mercurial Space of 'Central' America: New

question of U.S. Central American identity and culture often tethers its importance to the rising demographic presence of people from the Isthmus; that is, on its contribution to the future of U.S. Latino/as/x as a “majority minority”.<sup>75</sup> And while it is both necessary and urgent to consider how a growing population of Central Americans is changing the cultural landscape of the U.S., we must also consider how they have contributed to historical processes of resistance and social change. As I will demonstrate, a Central American presence in the U.S. at the start of the revolutionary wars across the Isthmus undoubtedly influenced the way Chicano/a activists and writers conceptualized a pan-Latino/a identity and shared oppression. Indeed, despite being a marginalized presence in spaces like the Mission district of San Francisco during the mid-twentieth century, Central Americans were vital in shifting the boundaries of a cultural politics of identity.

The revolutionary and paramilitaristic Chicano/a movement of the 1960s-70s mobilized itself as a response to various cultural and sociopolitical oppressions. As critical studies of the movement continue to focus on a widespread archive of creative work that reimagines new processes of identity-formations, the bulk of emerging scholarship bypasses the cross-cultural networks that informed both spaces of contestation and transnational relations. To study the productive construction of a U.S. Latino/a/x identity is to engage with a critical lens of

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Orleans, Honduras, and the Banana Republic”, *Hemispheric American Studies*, 2008; “The Errant Latino: Irisarri, Central Americanness, and Migrant’s Intention”, *The Latino Nineteenth Century*, 2016

<sup>75</sup> See Gruesz, “Utopia Latina: The Ordinary Seaman in Extraordinary Times”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 2013. I also attended a roundtable conference in 2015 titled, “The Future of Central American Studies,” at Duke University. Designed by Central American scholars across the U.S., including Claudia Milian, Arturo Arias, Maritza Cardenas, Kency Cornejo, etc., the conference addressed the necessary visibility of Central American studies within Latino/a Studies programs. Yet, many talks also cautioned against narrating a study of Central American identity and culture as important *because* of its rising demographic presence. Maritza Cardenas, in particular, spoke at length about the violence of demographic numbers and the ways certain Central American communities across the U.S. are often ignored due to a small presence in numbers. A study of Central America should be necessary insofar as it speaks to a wide-ranging set of cultural issues that complicate the traditional paradigm of Latino/a Studies programs.

hemispheric Latinidades, especially as it relates to the developing Latin American revolutions of the 60s and 70s. According to Juan Felipe Herrera, such a comparative rethinking was particularly necessary for the Mission-based collective whose pan-Latino/a identity coalesced around diasporic subjects: “[T]he exodus of Latin Americans and Southeast Asians from their homelands, which were in economic and political turmoil, has released sociopolitical and nostalgic claims for a New Greenness. Early poets, artists, and writers in the Mission moved and wrote to the mix and flow of exile and displacement...” (219). This affective relationality and move towards an anti-national consciousness mediated by “exodus” and “exile” encourages a reading of diaspora as a series of multiple claims, encounters, and departures. As long as “the mix and flow of exile and displacement...” navigate a discourse of transcultural poetics during the Chicano/a movement, the politics of exile cannot be divorced from representation.

Édouard Glissant’s collection of essays, *Poetics of Relation*, evokes a study of relations based on diversity rather than unity; acknowledging a totality that doesn’t resort to universalization; and within a circuitous temporality rather than teleological progression. This engagement with relationality as a decolonial framework of identity departs from dialectical tensions and shifts toward a multiplicity of differences, situating oppressed and oppressor within sites of connectivity instead of fixed origins of belonging. For Glissant, the metaphor of the rhizome thus becomes emblematic of an “uprootedness” that does not adhere to a colonialist, exclusionary logic or totalitarian principle; he states, “the rhizome, an unmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air... maintains, therefore the idea of rootedness but challenges that of the totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). The status of the exiled is articulated as both open, “in the air”, and rooted,

expressed in a mobilizing errantry that excessively resists a tendency to look at the root as symbol of permanence and essentialism; identity, for Glissant, is always in process and relational.

Yet, an essay in the writer's previous collection, *Caribbean Discourse*, describes the condition of exilic subjects in terminology that best reflects the sociopolitical turmoil encountered by Pocho-Che members. Titled, "Le retours et le detours", the concept of detours, unlike retours, moves away from the desire for an originary source and rooted belonging by navigating alternative routes of being: "diversion is the ultimate resort of a population whose domination by an Other is concealed: it then must search elsewhere for the principle of domination, which is not evident in the country itself" (19-20). Thus, for Glissant, detours are paradigms of a shifting ambivalence contingent upon the subject's search for a shared "elsewhere" that resists systems of domination and extends outside of the nation-state. We may frame Herrera's "exodus" and "exile", then, as a quest for alternative and multiple crossroads that do not necessarily operate within an experience of displacement, but rather function as voyages of relocation and relation.

Insofar as the drive for detour is motivated by an encounter with ubiquitous, far-reaching modes of domination, the specific locale of the Mission became a privileged point of interaction, a shared "elsewhere", for exilic Central American refugees and U.S. Latino/a residents.<sup>76</sup> According to one of the collective's organizing members, Alejandro Murguía, many encounters with FSLN cadre members living in the Mission inspired both a militaristic alliance with Nicaragua's leftist party and a cultural solidarity extending geopolitical boundaries. In "The Medicine of Memory", Murguía states

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<sup>76</sup> See "Ten Years that Shook the City: San Francisco 1968-1978"

Being Xicano, with Mexica roots, I am connected to Central America through culture. In Mesoamerica, the Nahuatl culture spread as far south as Nicaragua, whose indigenous Nahuatl name, Nicarahuac, means “Hasta aqui llego el Nahua” (The Nahuas came this far). So culturally I’m connected to Nicaragua, and therefore politically... One other point connects me historically to Nicaragua: when the Tennessee filibuster William Walker set out to invade Nicaragua in 1855, he sailed from San Francisco. (133)

What is perhaps most important about this indigenous heritage is that Murguía predicates linguistic referents of difference as a means of historicizing a continental relationship and unity. Instead of an originary indigeneity grounded by a root of sameness, the Nahuatl’s rhizomatic spread across Mesoamerica began a process of cultural-political relationality between the Xicano with Mexica roots and the Nahuas of Nicaragua, constituting a unity-diversity between the Other and (an)Other. Such a historical etymology may ostensibly read as a desired retour to a Native home-space, Mesoamerica; however, Murguía delineates an alternative historical association acknowledging imperialist models of domination and exploitation. His emphasis on San Francisco as a point of departure for Walker and as a site of encounters between el Frente and el Pocho-Che renders both the city and its inhabitants as victims of a marginalization that exists across various geographical locations, yet simultaneously encloses a specific space. Consequently, one must understand that while detours encourage a move beyond borders into what Glissant claims is “a return to the point of entanglement” that is not “the dream origin”, the process of articulating a transcultural identity without reducing differences to an abstract generalization entails approaching the point of entanglement as multiple. That is, for members of the Pocho-Che, in particular, representations of a common Latinidad contend with contradictions and paradoxes that signal the diversity of transnational populations. On the one hand, U.S.

Chicano/as like Murguía revisit a historical identity that is simultaneously constitutive and excessive to the nation-state, while Central American refugees, by their very status as exiled subjects, exist outside of boundaries, yet victims of a legally sanctioned oppression. The intersecting and shifting ground of such entanglements, among many, is the Mission.

It is precisely this attention to a unity-diversity of relations that motivated the collective's imaginary tropicalization of the Mission. Scholars Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman's seminal book, "Tropicalizations", presents an analytical overview of how various creative artists and writers materialize a *Latinidad* within tropical tropes and symbols. Yet, as both authors argue, images of tropicalization, such as plants and fruits, are stereotypes that circulate the popular imaginary and reify an often misrepresented *Latinidad*. Examining the self-representations of Latino/a identity vis-à-vis the term re-tropicalizations, then, reimagines a transcultural poetics of resistance, privileging the heterogeneity of a pan-*latinidad* imaginary: "the various groups and their association are seen in dynamic, relational terms, with traditions and continuities weighing off subtly against changes and re-configurations..." (187). Thus, "Tropicalizations" inevitably becomes a study of the "processes of subjectification" and uneven exchanges, of representational paradoxes that "attempt to go beyond a simplistic binarism that denounces the monologism of U.S. dominant constructs", but that ultimately underline a U.S. Latino/a discourse "recirculating tropical' signifiers with newly invested meanings, at times liberatory, and at others potentially oppressive in their ambiguity" (195). Moreover, it also becomes axiomatic that tensions inherent in the representation of a unity-diversity undeniably center on concepts of articulation. Such reclamations for a discursive and visual presence seek to subvert misrepresentations of diverse *Latinidades* and empower community, which is why I call for re-articulation of the pan-Latino/a collective that assembled within and around the Chicano/a movement.

Indeed, one must ask how a reading of *re-tropicalizations* as enactments of social agency enables the collaboration of Chicano/a nationalist ideologies with that of a Third World Collective? This attempt to address the interconnected politics and tropicalizations of these particular ideologies is central to Roderick Hernandez's dissertation focus on the Pocho-Che. For Hernandez, a cross-examination of the collective's literary and cultural production reveals that the tropical idiom of *vision tropical* surfaced out of the need among diverse Latino/a groups to rearticulate their histories and imagine an alternative future grounded in solidarity and resistance. He navigates a variety of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to ultimately highlight how certain transcultural tensions and affinities introduce a new "American poetics"<sup>77</sup>. While Hernandez's study of the Pocho-Che's tropical agenda focuses on the productive reconfiguration of community and space, one of his key concerns with the emerging transcultural poetics is that conflicts over nationalism and internationalism largely construct a transnational subjectivity that is limited and exclusive. In particular, he takes issue with the essay that opens the collective's first mimeographed journal, *El Pocho-Che*: "The Evolution of the Mind", claiming that "it presents a linear, progressive, and value-laden model of political and intellectual development that presumes one phase to be more virtuous than another... its utopian telos (Humanism) is... little more than a universalizing liberal bourgeois ideal of unity" (67).

Now, while I agree with Hernandez's critique of the essay's contradictions and inconsistencies, my reading of the text, alternatively, does not seek to highlight the efficacy of Macias' epistemological concerns, but rather I want to engage with the effects of the essay's discrepancies. On the one hand, Macias' essay, which Hernandez describes as "echoing the tone of Frantz Fanon's psychological writings on the decolonization of the mind", catalogues four

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<sup>77</sup> Hernandez's dissertation goes into much more detail about the differences between transnational politics and transcultural poetics. Moreover, he sees American poetics as encompassing other non-Latino/a populations.



evolutionary “mentalities” through which Mexicans living in the United States should successively move through as they search for a sociopolitical enlightenment (67). Thus, the operative position of the essay’s “evolutionary-cum-revolutionary consciousness” articulates a concern with structures of thought – shifting and paradoxically reimagining a progressive and multilayered move into Humanism (66). On the other hand, the work’s formal framework resembles, although with a difference, a manifesto of identity that does not only authenticate itself within an essay format, but also through its journey across nation-bound identity registers. That Hernandez views such an agenda as presuming “one phase to be more virtuous than the other” is troubled by the narrator’s emphasis on relationality: “[T]hird world groups recognize their common ties of misfortune...” and “[T]his author wishes to stress that he will present the humanist mentality in context with interaction amongst various ethnic types” (43, 45). The authorial voice shifts and the reader is relocated away from the binarism and looming threat of disconnection into a relationality with “various ethnic types”. The evolutionary paradigm, although fraught with western concepts of time and centered on an epistemological teleology, is an enumerating line of shifting relationships that manifests the contradictions inherent in framing and performing a humanist consciousness.

For both Macias and Hernandez, the troubling conceptualization of an internationalist way of thinking sews and tears itself within processes of articulation. And it is this very idea of practicing (dis)articulations that sits at the forefront of Brent Edwards book, *The Practice of Diaspora*. Edwards’ text focuses on a reading of transnational black print culture during the early-to-mid twentieth century, demarcating translation as the site that shapes black diasporic cultures. Nonetheless, of great concern to Edwards and to my project as well is the suggestion that diaspora is “less of a historical condition than a set of practices” that exemplify divergent

ways of examining a global population beyond national and linguistic borders.<sup>78</sup> In particular, what becomes a central concept surrounding issues of articulation is the term *decalage*.

According to the book's prologue, "[I]f a discourse of diaspora articulates difference, then one must consider the status of that difference but, more broadly, the trace or the residue, perhaps, of what resists or escapes translation... [S]uch an unevenness or differentiation marks a constitutive *decalage* in the very weave of the culture, one that cannot be either dismissed or pulled out"

(13). This "unevenness" that marks and unmarks diaspora creates tensions that must necessarily be acknowledged and thus suggests that in the construction of a diasporic vision, representation is always going to contend with gaps. When *decalage* becomes visible it introduces a way of understanding such gaps without automatically demanding that they be overcome or, as Edwards expresses, that they be "propped up into an artificially 'even' or 'balanced' state of 'racial' belonging" (14). The *Tin-Tan* magazines unapologetically require interpretation through Edwards' concept of *decalage* insofar as the term provides a lens for reading the "effects" of (dis)articulations, gaps, exclusions, instead of reading for the efficiency of representation. Since, as Edwards claims, these haunting gaps are what account for movement within, towards, and beyond forms of articulations.

Yet, while Edwards introduces a fascinating relationship between articulation and *decalage* founded on a metaphor of the body, the interpretive model of *decalage*'s "two-ness" presents a limit for my project. For while Edwards takes up Stuart Hall's definition of articulation as "joining up" and privileges the word's etymology "as metaphor of the body", the appropriation of the joint as a site of linkage and difference wherein separations of "bones and members" occur plays out a two-ness that does not produce. In other words, the joint, like *decalage*, accounts for movement, but does not reveal what is at stake in the ability to

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<sup>78</sup> Found in Brent Edwards' prologue to "The Practice of Diaspora"

acknowledge separation, to gaze at gaps. To be sure, the productive nature of seeing gaps and making something visible vis-à-vis artistic representations of identity purposely sits outside of his scope of inquiry; Edwards' scholarly concerns do not engage with such issues. Thus, it would be suitable to question whether (dis)articulations can be re-viewed within an alternative framework of "two-ness," one that acknowledges decalage, but likewise privileges the engendering of a political identity.

bell hooks' seminal essay, "The Oppositional Gaze", indeed offers the type of critical lens that will be crucial to an understanding of the Pocho-Che's pan-latinidad. As an essay that cross-examines the ways in which black female spectators "employ a deconstructive filmic practice to undermine existing grand cinematic narratives" that reinforced white supremacy, Hooks' study also invites us, through a Foucauldian path, to "search those margins, gaps, and locations on and through the body where agency can be found" (94, 95).<sup>79</sup> In this respect, the power to rebel and to defy depends on one's ability to look back and to gaze at oneself, both claiming a political stance and constructing an awareness of "looking" relations. Effectively, Hooks here offers an alternative two-ness that is not articulated through a joint, but rather through an outside-inside body paradigm: "[S]paces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can *both* interrogate the gaze of the Other but also *look back*, and *at one another*, naming *what we see*" (95, my emphasis). Here, unlike the joint, the connection speaks across gaps between bodies. The power of looking engenders a political mobilization that speaks for a diaspora of colonized people without the prosthetic props that inform a global "sameness", gazing at the Other and naming oneself serve as performances of resistant identity-formations.

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<sup>79</sup> bell hooks talk about the relationship between power and resistance takes up Foucault's examination of the relationship between both tensions

In my attempt to utilize Bell Hooks's theoretical framework as a way to read the Pocho-Che's cultural and literary production, I am not trying to force a connection between the two distinct forms of critical and literary productivity. Instead, I'd like to emphasize that, like film spectatorship, the collective's work and tropical metaphor lend themselves to be *seen* as performances that *resist* hegemonic forms of (mis)representation; they demand an oppositional gaze and a space of visibility. Furthermore, Hooks's emphasis on the politicization that develops within and because of the oppositional gaze suggests that visibility – spectating - is simultaneously an act of defiance and a process that transforms the possibility for multiple identity formations not rooted in articulations of sameness and universality. The Pocho-Che's desire to embrace a third world consciousness remained feasible insofar as they kept resisting and refusing, transforming and producing counter-narratives of representation. This chapter will now move into a close reading of how representations of a diasporic latinidad informed concepts like “La Raza”, *vision tropical*, and Chicano/a nationalism.

If the Mission became a point of entanglement for a divergent, heterogeneous community of Latino/a creative artists and subjects, then one must examine the transnational consciousness that emerged and became abundant with semantic shifts and contradictions. To begin with, the framing of a “Pocho-Che” collective discloses a preoccupation with the performativity of dress and language. According to Herrera, the group coined the term “Pocho”, because of its ability “to signify “half-breed” Chicano/as--caught in the fracture of identity, neither American nor Mexican, a mere “Pocho”, a stuttering kind. Being Pocho was to reacquire, to transform”, while “‘Che’ was Latin America itself, its possibility for political change; the revolutionary figure of Che Guevara...” (218). As previously stated, the Mission was a location of mixed, divergent ethnic populations and thus representing such a diversity without conflating sociohistorical

backgrounds meant re-articulating a cultural bohemia outside of specific spatial or geopolitical referents. The word “Pocho”, as Herrera suggests, then employs a discursive strategy divorced from nation-state referents, organizing itself somewhere between a U.S. America and Mexico. The rhetorical move then completes and authenticates itself by demarcating a second register, “Che”, who inscribes a particular historical and material, “Latin America”, relationality to oppression. The politically charged name simultaneously imparts itself with decalage and sews itself together within the hyphen, signifying a “Pocho” that redresses itself with “Che” and thus authenticates its own political agency. As I shall note, the disparate, but integrated registers that inform four magazine publications by Editorial Pocho-Che refuse to adhere to a racial or cultural nationalism, animating the texts’ formal and aesthetic features with productive contradictions.

In the quest to adopt a tropical representation of Latinidad, the Pocho-Che fashioned an alternative look at the stereotypical representations associated with Latin American/Latino/a identity. Published in the fall of 1975, Volume 1, Number 1 of the *Tin-Tan* magazine series established the collective’s first attempt at documenting and, by proxy, anthologizing a

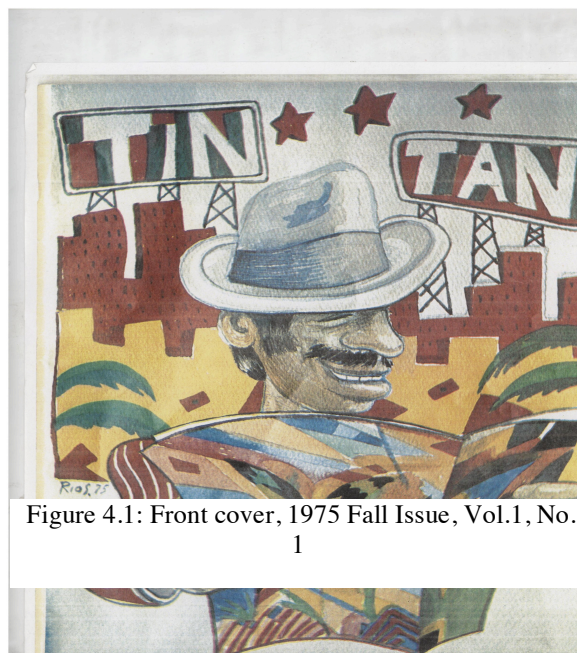


Figure 4.1: Front cover, 1975 Fall Issue, Vol.1, No.

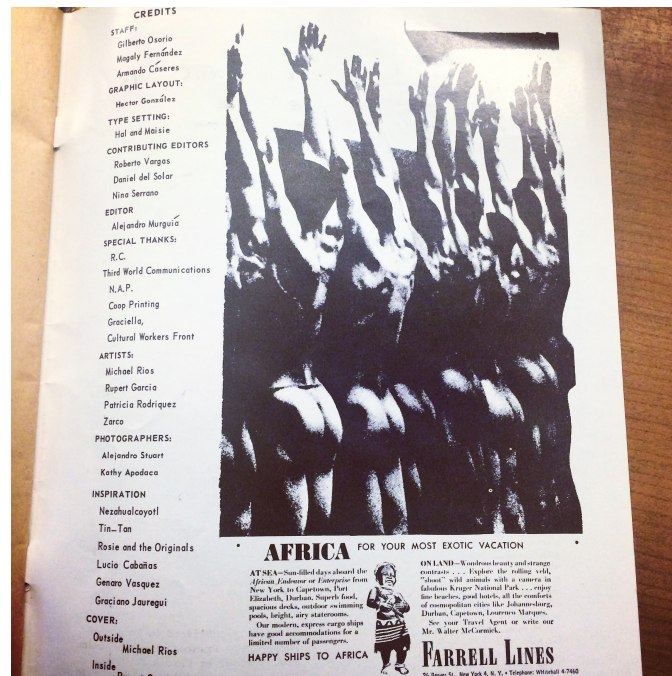


Figure 4.2 Africa Ad

representation of pan-Latino/a identity. The front (Figure 4.1) and back (Figure 4.2) covers of the issue subsume an excess of tropical colors that metavisually show the frames relationship to a countercultural movement. They are palpably lively and celebratory of tropical tropes that weave together an abstract assortment of colors, exaggerated human features, and refuses to preview any formal information – it lacks a discursive presence and privileges a visual frame of epistemology. In stark contrast, however, the magazine undoes its own tropical frame and proliferates the inside front and back covers with a shocking set of images: the face of a dead woman headed by the words, “The South America Book” and a queue of naked bodies facing a wall with arms stretched high framed by a satirical ad titled, “Africa, for your most exotic vacation”. Taken as a whole, the juxtaposition of content and context unfolds not only as a political statement about the dangerous circulation and consumption of tropicalism, but also serves as a gateway into an incomprehensible, yet shifting understanding of Others. The cover articulates that within an internationalist representation of oppression and domination, the stereotyped and, consequently, fixed images of Latinidad become undone. Images of racialized

others and the contrasts in the cover's texts enable an alternative view of the magazine's framing power: the cover stands outside of the magazine's content, yet speaks on its own.

Nonetheless, the performance of framing gestures is not simply limited to the covers of the magazines. Indeed, the emphasis on a multifaceted understanding of difference further moves beyond the covers and into the very center of text. As Volume 2, Issue 5 (Summer 1977) illustrates, in a text preoccupied with the work local and U.S.-based writers such as Nina Serrano and Juan Pietri, as well as Latin American poets such as Fernando Saldivar, the editors search for an ambivalent balance that will acknowledge national subjects without privileging a nationalist ideology. Thus, at the epicenter of the magazine, where the bind exposes itself, is a series of pictures that depict art by San Francisco born, Ralph Madariaga. Introduced by a short description that read, "As artists we must all share our customs, life-styles and imagery with one another. It is only thru Artistic, Social, and Political Ideologies, that we ascertain and retain a place in history and document it for our children" (15), the series of images begin with titled portraits of a "serpent" and "old woman", followed by untitled colored pictures of curved images, and ending with a portrait of "La Gente". Such a set up symbolically demonstrates the difficulties in accounting for an encompassing, yet particular group of subjects. The frame that frames this interior frame, the short description, introduces a body of work (images and subjects) for a particular kind of gaze, a look that demands the recognition of an artistic presence and a look that "looks back", becoming a spectator of its own cultural production. The abstract-like images that become central to both the magazine and Madariaga's section, ironically, constitute a Latino/a expression that is both representative of a historical American presence and excessive to a concrete, definite representation of it. The images and issue transform the realm of the visual to include the performativity of self-representation via a call for artistic and temporal

transgressions, opening up a space of contestation that reimagines belonging and one's position within it.

Yet, beyond their visual features, the magazines manipulate language, in particular, bilingualism in such a manner that exemplifies a desire to represent a decolonizing gaze. Moreover, engaging with this inability or better yet unwillingness to privilege one mode of speaking over the other, one must further acknowledge that in constituting such a gesture the texts multiply their own limits. For instance, Victor M. Valle's poem "Magazin de policia/Police Magazine" takes up an entire page in the January 1975 issue (Volume 2, Issue 6) and introduces an opening line that reads, "o en la hora del break", translated as "or at break time". That the word, "break" refuses translation and proliferates in the Spanish and English versions implies that the proper discursive presence of "break" is not in its written form, but rather in its spoken force. However, the word also marks a certain inaccessibility that does not necessarily relate to limits of translation, instead it references an aspect of U.S. Latinidad that remains untouched and self-explanatory. Another example of the significance of bilingualism resides within the fourth issue of *Tin-Tan* (Summer 1976). In an exclusive interview with Fania All-Star member, Willie Colon, the transcript of the formal interview is written in English, however, at the moment of the interview's conclusion, the question-turned-statement reads, "As we were leaving Willie Colon's room, Yomo Toro appears in the hallway. We talk for a few minutes. He leaves this, among other stories, in the tape recorder", proliferating the edges of the interview with a Spanish text. The Spanish story sits at the end of the section, not part of Colon's interview yet not completely dissociated in relevance. It invests itself in the story published in English and extends it beyond monolingualistic limitations, supplementing a translation of the text with an alternative story. Like the "break" in Valle's poems, it refuses to articulate itself within a common space of



Englishness, instead it overflows into a Spanglish, extends into a space of otherness that nonetheless relates, and makes decalage manifest in the slippages of linguistic differences.

The shifts between language and visual referents exemplify the Pocho-Che's desire to represent the Mission's diverse encounters with Latino/a subjects within the U.S. and beyond its borders. Thus, before I move into a reading of tropical tropes, I'd like to situate tropicalismo as a concept that is typically framed and articulated within the interactions with Central American migrants. In 1971 before the collective formerly became Editorial Pocho-Che, Murguía claims that Nicaraguan poet Roberto Vargas introduced him to García Márquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. What ensued was not only a fixation with Latin American politics and cultural imagery, but also a transition into the nominal classification, "La Raza". Murguía recalls, "Latin American movements were very strong in the late sixties. It forced you to find out who Carlos Marighela was, or who Camilo Torres was; Pocho-Che came out of this mixtures... We said 'Here is our barrio, here is our *gente*- but we are also part of *La Raza*, you can't deny it' (70). *La Raza* came to signify an uneven exchange between the Pocho-Che's commitment to tropicalization or what they labeled "greenness" and the Chicano/a movement's influential "Red Nation" poetics.<sup>80</sup> Here, *La Raza* signifies a series of rhetorical and discursive moves. On the one hand, "barrio" and "gente" are descriptive sociospatial referents that ostensibly exist outside of "La Raza". In fact, between all three markers, *La Raza* is the term that is both geographically unmarked discursively fragmented, "we are also *part of La Raza*". It is a rhizomatic referent of belonging that does not share a singular, originary point of entanglement, but rather navigates

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<sup>80</sup> There is a section dedicated to the influential ideology of the Red Nation as it relates to vision tropical. See City Lights Books. *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*. Ed. James. Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters. San Francisco: City Lights, 1998.

across a shared sociohistorical space, announcing “race” as the shifting movement of a heterogeneous detour.

Rereading the tropical images that emerged alongside an understanding of the Central American revolutionary wars allows us to better understand the performative evolution of the *Tin Tan* magazines.<sup>81</sup> According to Herrera, “*Tin Tan* would no longer mimic Pachuko working-class idioms and fashion styles on the silver screen- now he would dress as a Mission poet *congero* would dress, in white cottons and mango-watermelon-colored shirts, talking about apartheid, and about oppression in the Americas” (224). The emphasis on “no longer *mimic* Pachuko working-class idioms and fashion styles” as it contrasts with “he would dress as a Mission poet *congero*” suggests that clothing should function as a form of *authentic* self-representation. The dress of the “Mission poet *congero*”, unlike the Pachuko’s multiple fashion styles, was to also singularly represent and perform the unity of the collective’s multifaceted ideas/projects. Yet, unlike the Pachuko’s relationship to Chicanismo, the *congero* is not bound to a national or linguistic identity, but rather associated with a historical, hemispherically recognized musicality. For the collective, moving away from a cultural nationalism opened up the discursive space to include “apartheid” and “oppression in the Americas”.

Nonetheless, despite blatant outcries against a nationalist ideology, one must question why the collective compulsively accounted and advocated for representations of national subjects? What was the difference, if any, between acknowledging a specific literary and cultural production from countries like El Salvador and denouncing nationalism? How did they understand the national? Issue 5 of *Tin Tan* introduces a student speech transcript that was presented at a UC Berkeley protest. The text states,

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<sup>81</sup> By “evolution”, I don’t mind a linear, progressive account of development. Just a move outside of it

[T]he point is that while all the spontaneous movements of the late 60s were strong no one was doing that work. There was almost no communists that were attempting to give guidance to the mass movement; to combat the narrow nationalist ideas of the Chicano movement; to point out to us that imperialism is our enemy and that our movement must be given proletarian guidance; to teach us that our objective must be socialism rather than running off to build co-ops and communes... Ever since the late 1950's there has been no party which can provide leadership necessary for the working class and oppressed nationalities in this country to overthrow imperialism and to establish socialism. (23)

In a rhetorical outburst remarkably framed by and concerned with movement, the student starts by contesting the structural importance of social movements during the 1960s. For the protester, the perceived spontaneity of the movements did not ground a historical and structural resistance to imperialism. Instead, divested of “proletarian guidance”, the movements’ effects deviated from “socialism” and resulted in the building of “co-ops and communes”. However, such a move from “socialism” to “communes”, from “mass movement” to “narrow nationalist ideas” and back again to “oppressed nationalities” assumes that in a paradigm of political hierarchies the general and all-encompassing ideologies must contend with and acknowledge “class” and “nationalities”. Indeed, the force of such tensions does not propose an articulation of the national as a usable framework of sameness, but rather begins, ends, and self-articulates by accepting or pointing out the shared history of imperialism. S/he suggests that solidarity is not measured by “co-ops and communes”, but rather is seen through “movement,” a movement relates to a political mobilization should propel the body of diverse subjects beyond the confines of imperialist exploitations and oppressions. The repetitive use of “point out” reveals a call to see and to cultivate a political awareness that looks back; the transcript performs its own spectating.

Using this model of a unity-diversity informed by historical oppression, I'd like to close out this chapter by looking at a supplementary form introduced in Issue 5 of *Tin Tan*. Out of the previous four magazines, Issue 5 is the first to introduce a cover with photographs of world images instead of painted figures; in fact, it is also the only magazine to fuse drawn caricatures and objects with real world photographs. The magazine takes on such complex and important roles precisely because its form and content account for a conjuncture of sorts. First, the

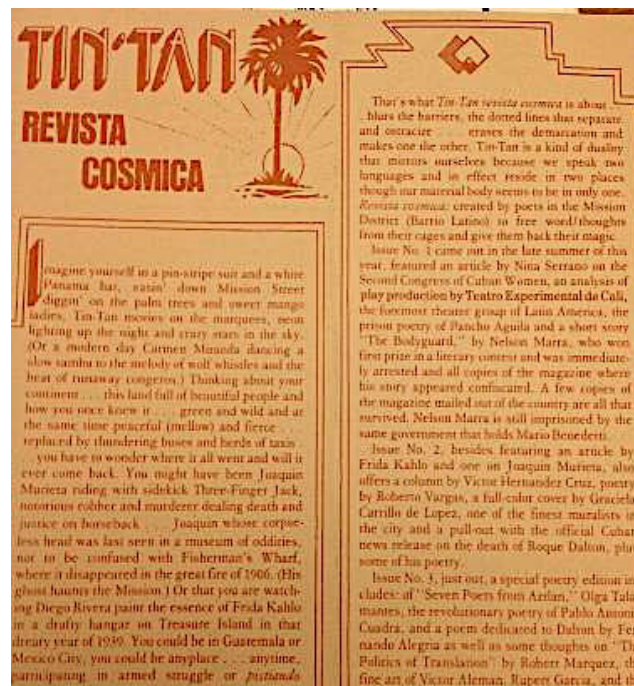


Figure 4.3: Pamphlet



magazine becomes an expression of a burgeoning pan-Latino/a consciousness that attempts to marry the local and global in ways that visually contrast and clash. It is a work of art that becomes translucently concerned with audience since it is also the first magazine to introduce a subscription pamphlet within its content (Figure 4.3). Most interestingly then is that the magazine speaks two-fold, articulating both its own agenda vis-à-vis the pamphlet and via the creative pieces within the content. For instance, after a imaginative account of the character *Tin*

*Tan*, the pamphlet claims, “[T]hat’s what *Tin Tan revista cosmica* is about/ blurs the barriers, the dotted lines that separate and ostracize... erases the demarcation and makes one the other. Tin-Tan is a kind of duality that mirrors ourselves because we speak two languages and in effect reside in two places although our material body seems to be in only one...”<sup>82</sup>. Ironically, the pamphlet found at the center of the magazine announces the structure and agenda of the collective’s publishing business, framing the work within its frame. Moreover, the pamphlet itself performs the doubling when it proclaims, “blurs the barriers, the dotted lines that separate and ostracize... erases the demarcation and makes one the other”. By materializing the dots that it intends to blur, it transcribes a performance that aims to represent the insignificance of divisions that seek to ostracize, transforming one and the other into a relational “one the other” that looks back at the dotted lines and resists. At the metatextual level, then, in the construction of a productive ambiguous form of subscription, the magazine’s congruous context and content pause, lingering in a discursive and textual “elsewhere” that serves as a point of entanglement.

I attempt to develop an argument that reads the various contradictions and tensions proliferating across Pocho-Che publications as necessary and revealing. On the one hand, using Glissant’s theoretical tools of detour and relationality, I argue that the collective’s encounter and experience with diasporic Latino/a subjects demands a re-examination of transcultural poetics and pan-latinidad. Unlike critical works that engage with differences as inefficient or limiting, I seek to explore conflicts and working paradoxes as “functional contradictions” that need to be examined on their own. Much like Brent Edwards’ examination of black transnationalism reveals the Pocho-Che’s productive ambiguities disclose a discourse of diaspora that “articulates difference.” Nonetheless, while such a framework becomes crucial to an understanding of the

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<sup>82</sup> The pamphlet is two-sided. One side has information about payment and a section for an address input, while the other side has a small description of who the Pocho-Che are and what they do.

multifaceted representations of pan-Latinidad, I argue that because representations must always contend with gaps and (dis)articulations, the Pocho-Che's goal was not to fill in those gaps or overcome them, instead their cultural and literary production creates a way of understanding difference. Thus, I read their publications as performative of an oppositional gaze. The magazines demand to be looked at just as much as they themselves look back at the Other. The tensions with modes of domination should not be read within a binary lens, but rather, as Glissant states, they must be viewed in a poetics of relation. As a collective that emerged in the late 1960s and continuously reformatted the frame of their identity, the Pocho-Che self-represent themselves as an alternative political movement, performing a similar, yet different mobilization of revolution. They do not sit in contrast to the larger social movements of the time, but rather celebrate a relationality that highlights a subversive desire for recognition.

### **Border Thinking and Dislocative Media**

In *Local Histories/ Global Designs*, Walter D. Mignolo conceptualizes “border thinking” or “border epistemology” as emerging from the conflicts between colonial powers and colonized countries, as produced by the marginalized living in former colonized countries, and as narrated by “those who did not move, but around whom the world moved” (72). Specifically, he focuses on Chicano/a intellectuals who dwell in a unique border thinking position both because the “world moved around them (the southern frontier in the nineteenth century) or because they descended from immigrants but they are not immigrants themselves (e.g., Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga)” (73). Chicano/as challenge the colonial difference that claims racialized/othered bodies are epistemologically inferior by shifting the emergence of critical thought away from a European genesis (Plato or the Enlightenment era) and resituating it within their local histories. In other words, by understanding their lived experiences as informed by an

imposed colonial difference, Chicano/as are able to think from the interiority of the margin, from within the break of the colonial matrix of power where knowledge does not belong to one group or another. So border thinking then functions as a political and epistemological fulcrum of sorts: on one end, it emerges as a response to the colonial difference, and as a way of thinking from within the wound, while, on the other, it is a move away from this disparity of difference into a new and liberating way of thinking.

Thus, it is important to note here that Migonolo's decolonial understanding of "border thinking" vis-à-vis Chicano/a intellectuals is informed in particular by Anzaldúa's seminal book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza Consciousness*. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa embraces her identity as a border dwelling *Mestiza* because it generates an-other way of thinking and being, producing an epistemological shift called la mestiza consciousness that moves "out of habitual formations: from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes" (101). She further claims that mestiza consciousness is "a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave" (102). By claiming a "new mythos", Anzaldúa is providing an alternative accounting of the marginalized Chicano/a who cannot trace for his/herself a history of origin or belonging. Mythos here, originating from the ancient Greek "to report", is a narrative construction of ethnic identity that asserts a conscious rupture from oppressive traditions and ways of knowing. To possess mestiza consciousness is to deconstruct the hegemonic narrative of Western superiority, and then to shape, sew, and tailor new ways of understanding from the perspective of the colonized.

Likewise, Mignolo's decolonial theory of border thinking takes shape as "an other thinking".<sup>83</sup> In the article, "DELINKING: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality," Mignolo argues that reformatory political and economic practices (like liberation theology, neoliberalism, and Marxism) maintain the logic of coloniality because they favor Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge and understanding. Thus, in order for epistemic decolonization to occur and flourish, it is necessary to expose "the hidden complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality" by shifting the terms of the conversation on de-coloniality, invoking a new grammar of thought.<sup>84</sup> Such a practice is achieved through a process of de-linking from Western epistemology and the expansion of imperial languages. Mignolo states,

[C]ritical border thinking provides one method to enact the de-colonial shift and it operates as a *connector* between different experiences of exploitation can now be thought out and explored in the sphere of the colonial and imperial differences.

Thus, critical border thinking is the method that connects pluriversality (different colonial histories entangled with imperial modernity) into a uni-versal project of delinking from modern rationality and building other possible worlds. Critical border thinking involves and implies both the imperial and colonial differences.

(my emphasis, 498)

Much like Anzaldúa claims in the opening statement of this chapter, critical border thinking operates as a bridge, or in Mignolo's words, a "connector", when a critique of coloniality and modern rationality originates from within the wound, or colonial difference. Then the de-colonial shift becomes manifest in a dewesternized vision of universality where the pluriversal is the uni-

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<sup>83</sup> *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 75

<sup>84</sup> "DELINKING", 485



versal; that is, in a practice of relationality where we imagine “a world in which many worlds will co-exist”.<sup>85</sup>

Because Mignolo asserts that “[C]onceptual (and theoretical) de-linking is... the necessary direction of liberation and decolonization...” (456), I will begin my analysis of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre and their Transborder Immigrant Tool first by introducing the collective and their mission, then by close reading an experimental play they wrote in response to the political controversies caused by the T.I.T project. At both of the creative turns, EDT is engaging in a form of epistemic disobedience that illustrates a conceptual and linguistic de-linking from hegemonic understandings of knowledge production. The play and T.I.T are complimentary poetic counterparts that break away from a limiting political discourse on immigration and perform a series of dis-locative moves in a decolonial practice of relationality. On the one hand, T.I.T is a low cost phone app that contains a GPS system and poetry sound files. It was designed to help lost and dehydrated migrants on the U.S. side of the border find water caches. On the other hand, when T.I.T was introduced to a popular imaginary by mass media news sources in 2010 as “enabling” or “abetting” illegal immigration, EDT’s response was to re-articulate and repurpose the narrative of the tool within their own words, thus publishing, *Sustenance: A Play for All Trans [ ] Borders*. *Sustenance* is a play that emphasizes the aesthetics of the T.I.T. and the political discourses it is engaging with or resisting. From the transcendentalist work of Henry Thoreau, to the legend of La Difunta Correa, and even to the inclusion of police transcripts ordering a federal investigation of T.I.T, the play weaves a series of narratives to stage an intervention that attempts to reclaim all life forms. EDT is not interested in the democratic futurity of any nation-state or in a reformatory politics of recovery vis-à-vis a

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<sup>85</sup> “DELINKING”, 498

liberal human rights discourse, but rather in challenging the policies of a U.S./Mexico border that threatens the existence of sustainable life.

EDT was cofounded in 1997 by performance artist and hacktivist Ricardo Dominguez and Brett Stalbaum. The collective, now called Electronic Disturbance Theatre 2.0, is comprised of academic researchers, media artists, and poets who develop a theory and practice of non-violent civil disobedience across various digital media. Yet, as an ideological concept, the Electronic Disturbance Theatre has roots in the early 1980s when Ricardo Dominguez began contemplating the future of theatre.<sup>86</sup> In his move to New York City to begin research on a “new form of electronic theatre,” Dominguez became influenced by the tactics and ideology of the Zapatista Movement in Mexico. He states, “I started working with the Zapatistas in developing an intercontinental network of struggle and resistance... We initiated the practice of electronic civil disobedience and electronic action in 1998, and there we did a series of performances for the Department of Defense, Congress and many other communities who responded to the issue of civil disobedience as an area of interest and dialogue” (UCSDguardian.org). Since then Dominguez has engaged in a series of electronic civil disobedience practices using virtual sit-in technology. Virtual Sit-Ins use HTML software programming that allow protesters/participants access to a specific website. Every time a person joins the sit-in, the website is forced to reload, generating additional traffic to the site and consequently blocking access to it. From the 2010 Virtual Sit-In on the digital office of the UC President’s website for the Day of Action to Defend Public Education to EDT’s 2007 “FloodNet system” that blocked access to certain U.S. and Mexican government websites, Dominguez’s objectives remain the same: “[E]lectronic civil disobedience allows us to think about the question of art becoming a social manifestation, allows

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<sup>86</sup> See Edward. “Ricardo Dominguez.” *The Guardian*, University of California, San Diego, 12 Apr. 2010, [ucsdguardian.org/2010/04/12/ricardo-dominguez/](http://ucsdguardian.org/2010/04/12/ricardo-dominguez/).

us to think about art allowing communities who do not have access to power to make themselves present... It allows us to see that art is an active space in public culture and that it cannot be disregarded” (UCSDguardian.org).

The blurring of boundaries between art and social manifestation, where art *becomes* a social manifestation that allows “us to see that art is an active space in public culture and that it cannot be disregarded” is what is at stake in the play about T.I.T. For example, in a 2010 conference presentation given by Amy Sara Carroll and Ricardo Dominguez at UC, Santa Barbara, Carroll argues that “[T]he tool has been understood completely as a political gesture rather than be understood as an aesthetic gesture as well” (UCSBLitCultureMedia). She thus found it necessary to write on the aesthetic principles behind the project in order to intervene, disrupt, and veer from a limited political discourse into a dialog about T.I.T’s performative qualities. What were fragments at the time of the UCSB presentation culminated in the publication of *Sustenance: A Play for All Trans [ ] Borders*. The title, like the rest of the play, performs a reformulation of framing gestures that generate juxtapositions. The crotchets or brackets interrupting the words “Trans” and “Borders” in “*Trans [ ] Borders*” are ironic departures from the omission of material (bodies and language) since they incorporate the possibility of signifying within the empty frame. Conversely, the empty frame also speaks and speaks back to “Borders” because it marks an-other kind of inaccessibility where the separated brackets disavow the imposition of boundaries, limitations, or obstructions.

The play’s framing is a performative gesture that engenders a linguistic de-linking from multiple forms of Western aesthetics. For example, the content of the play begins and develops within a 0 act and tenth of a scene, written, “Act 0 – Scene 0.1” (1). This other frame, like the title, disrupts the logic of the theatre since the play develops within a marker of absence, Act 0,

and a fraction of signification, 0.1. It alludes to a purposeful mismanagement of the border narrative that has resulted in the dehumanization of migrants, and disrupts the order of progress and development that has rendered the Global South as inferior and irrational. EDT's intervention or de-linking begins at the margins of narrative development so as to make manifest the multiple ways systems of power have appropriated meaning making to disenfranchise a vulnerable group of people. Thus, we can consider the disorder of the frames as introducing what Mignolo calls "a new grammar of thought" where poetic experimentation, with its recombinant logic, disjointed syntax, and ruptured semantics, can bear witness to the unimaginable, and remember the various bodies wandering across the life-sustaining border desert.

The Sonoran desert is often characterized by its stifling, arid climate which has taken the lives of many lost migrants wandering its vast landscape. "The Devil's Highway", in particular, is a corridor of desert land known today for being the most dangerous migrant passageway in North America. But, while dehydration is the primary cause of death for those attempting to cross the U.S./Mexico borderlands, EDT's work suspends the narrative of the desert as a natural death trap by exposing and challenging the political policies that produce fatal spaces like "The Devil's Highway." Accordingly, the legend of La Difunta Correa is invoked in the opening sections of the play. She is an Argentinean popular saint, yet to be canonized by the Catholic Church, who "set off to find her husband with an infant tow; but, crossing the desert, she died of dehydration. Those who found her body also found her son, miraculously still alive, his mouth latched to her breast" (1). The image of the dead, yet nurturing mother nursing her son invokes the phenomena of let-down as an alternative response to bodily distress, breaking up the fight-or-flight dialectic. It also sets the tone for the first stage of the T.I.T project, which is to disturb the

“political aesthetics of the current U.S./Mexico border.”<sup>87</sup> The play conveys, “[T]o cross technologies of gender, race, sexuality, nation, religion, class: imagine caching water in the Mexican-U.S. borderlands’ “season of dying” as a comparable act of spontaneous release- not as a political statement (or not only that), but as a corporeal reflex, as an intuitive ethical gestus to insist, ‘not on my watch’?” (1). Caching water in the borderlands during its “season of dying” serves as an aesthetic and ethical interruption to “political statements” that over determine the borderland region. By claiming that caching water is “a comparable act of spontaneous release... a corporeal reflex,” the text expands the boundaries of the desert’s potential to save rather than take lives. The borderlands are sensationalized in an-other way: the desert is not a space where bodies are consumed or threatened, but rather is a space of nourishment. Instead of imagining the borderlands as a frontier with clearly demarcated edges and closures, it is envisioned as a kind of hinge both containing (caching) and releasing (corporeal reflex) life.

In EDT’s imagining of place and landscape the myth of pure, whole, and contained bodies is unraveled and replaced by images of free movement. The section titled, “Trans [ ] walking into the scared,” states:

[R]ecalling prior waves of border cultural production, we emphasize alternative aesthetics for the Mexican-U.S. borderlands (and beyond). On the one hand, the performative matrix of TBT functions as an efficacious, wholeheartedly inefficient poem-in-motion, as an earthwork to interrupt discourses which, ensconced in their own design of market-oriented-transparency meet military-industrial-complex, reduce the would-be crosser to debris or felon. On the other hand, TBT balances the aforementioned critical

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87 ENRÍQUEZ-LOYA, AYDÉ. SUSTENANCE (A PLAY FOR ALL TRANS () BORDERS) INTERVIEW WITH RICARDO DOMINGUEZ AND AMY SARA CARROLL. *Asterix: A Journal of Literature, Art, and Criticism*, 14 Dec. 2012, [asterixjournal.com/sustenance/](http://asterixjournal.com/sustenance/).

code switch with the blessed literalism of direction. Between the lower-cased border of Mexico and the United States and the upper-cased Borders of theory, art, literature, and public policy..., between the literal and imaginative cartographies of blockage and flow... (4-5)

According to Ricardo Dominguez, the “performative matrix of TBT” is the interrelated theoretical, artistic, and technological strategies that inform how the tool is going to disturb or resist issues of power and exploitation. He claims that at its core the matrix is “an assemblage of data bodies and real bodies in a new type of recombinant theatre” (UCSBLitCultureMedia).<sup>88</sup> Thus, the language of intentionality that claims an “alternative aesthetics for the Mexican-U.S. borderlands” mirrors the interruptive ideology, or rather the de-linking and re-linking strategies of the matrix. Whereas TBT functions as “efficacious,” it is also an “inefficient poem-in-motion,” and in its capacity as “earthwork,” it “interrupts discourses”. Meanwhile, the “lower-cased border of Mexico and the United States” crosses paths with “the upper-cased Borders of theory, art, literature, public policy...”, illustrating how the performative matrix functions a point of encounter wherein “theory, art, literature...” and geopolitical borders encounter one another in a space that dislocates the language and aesthetics of power; that is, in the interrelated process that dislocate the nation-state’s desire to erect impregnable borders.

Accompanying the section, “Trans [ ] walking into the sacred,” on the bottom right hand corner of the page, is a bracketed subsection containing the chorus. The subsection begins with the heading, “Chorus constellates,” and proceeds to form a cluster of letters and words divided by virgules (Figure 4.4). In the various subsections of the play where the chorus speaks, language is inverted, distorted, or split apart while simultaneously framed as an appendage of the official narrative. Thus, “Chorus constellates” attempts to relate a particular story about the T.I.T’s

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<sup>88</sup> paraphrased

aesthetic purpose in the non-telling of the composition's fragmentation; that is, at the level of linguistic dissonance. That “DA/ SEIN”, meaning existence, and “BE/ TWEEN” are split by virgules, and “All along-” and “the watch-” are extended by hyphen marks signals an impossible expression of belonging. The meandering split of “existencia” further extends that impossibility of belonging insofar as the migrant’s *existencia*, as shaped and split by “All along-/ the watch-/ *Tower.*”, represents what cannot penetrate the panopticon features of the border wall. DA/ SEIN

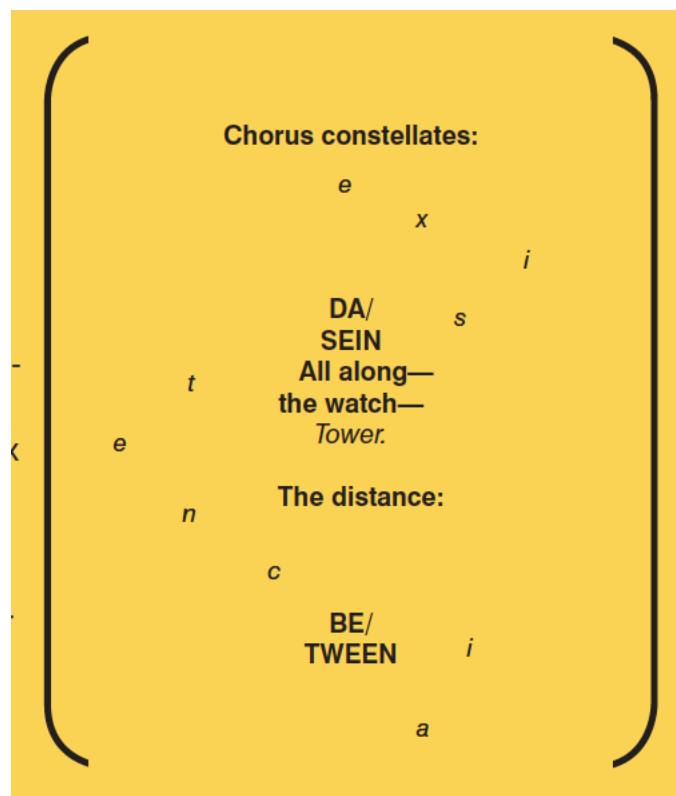


Figure 4.4: Chorus Constellates

and *existencia* can only appear as language that is riven, skewed, and scattered when crossing through the mechanizations of power. In other words, the performative matrix is a space where language fails or unravels in order to make manifest the migrant’s precarious position when crossing the surveilled lands of the U.S.-Mexican border.

An aesthetics of failure, for the EDT collective, is an indispensable strategy in the staging of a recombinant theatre that speaks back to power. According to Ricardo Dominguez, the T.I.T contains two systems of poetry: conceptual and survivalist (how to read the desert landscape).<sup>89</sup> As conceptual, the poetry is jarring. Words repeat in a nonsensical manner or undo themselves to the level of high-pitched frequency sounds. For instance, one of the members of EDT, Micha Cardenas, who acted as liaison between the poetry composer, Amy Sara Carroll, and NGO's/humanitarian groups in charge of placing barrels of water in the desert, claims that in helping design the tool she thought of "the intersections between transgender and transborder... that the trans and transborder and transgender can signal a crossing, but also a hope and a bravery in crossing" (AntiAtlas of borders). Thus, one of the poems that became part of the project reads and repeats in no particular order or sequences the gender symbols for "female" and "male," interrupted at the midpoint by a cacophonous high-pitch scream. The poem disorders the order of gendered thinking that attempts to contain identity within limiting and fixed notions of being. The fluid and alternating repetition of the symbols breaks at the scream, becoming something other than the codification of gender. Moreover, the sound is pitched at a high frequency level, disconnecting the listener from the leveled and monotonous tone of the reading. The listener is placed outside of the "right" frequency and no longer participating in the performative gestures of restriction that are produced by gendered binary thinking.

As a survivalist tactic, Amy Sara Carroll's poetry as a geo-poetics system (GPS) is an alternative performance. The T.I.T is a coded machine that responds to the machinization of the border that codes migrants as "other", as "illegal", and as "waste" or diseased-riddled bodies compromising the body politic of the United States. By designing a GPS system that both maps a

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<sup>89</sup> Quote taken from lecture given by Ricardo Dominguez at Cornell in September 2017



natural landscape instead of an urban setting, and provides eco-poetic sustenance, the tool performs what EDT calls “dis-locative media.”<sup>90</sup> In “Choreographic Resistance in the US-Mexico Borderlands,” Ashley Ferro-Murray states that “as a choreographic object, the static border defines the body as a surveillable object existing on one side or on the other—*but* which never sustainably lives or moves through, around, inside of, or beyond borderlands. Thus, to define the choreography of the borderlands in terms of a static object like a border wall (or line) is to enable the imagined choreographic stillness imposed by that border as something that halts the ephemerality of moving bodies.” This understanding of the border wall and its performative gestures is what redirects migrants into death traps like “The Devil’s Highway” and threatens physical harm as migrants in turn choreograph crossing maneuvers in terms of “climbing”, “jumping”, and “funneling”. Yet, Amy Sara Carroll’s eco-poetics rearrange the choreographies of crossing into a movement of sustenance and accountability. Her poetry is a decolonial practice of relationality insofar the spoken poetry that emanates from the cell phone is spoken in multiple languages (Spanish, English, Nahuatl, and Ayuujke/Mixe) and shape a movement towards life-sustaining sources and through the desert. She de-links from the political discourse that supports the existence of the U.S./Mexico border wall and reimagines an affective relationship between desert and walker.

The T.I.T. survivalist poems have been transcribed online as *Poems: The Desert Survival Series*, and, according to Carroll, are founded on two assumptions: “[A] desert is not just a desert. And, poetry-becoming-code/code-becoming-poetry could transubstantiate, translate into a lifesaving technology, sounding off” (“Of Ecopoetics and Dislocative Media”). Yet, it is important to note here that even though Carroll proposes an alternative form of coding where

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<sup>90</sup> tbt.tome.press

“poetry-becoming-code/code-becoming-poetry,” the eco-poems are often narrated as enabling an unnecessary kind of failure because they are perceived as a useless component of the tool, undermining its purpose as a navigational device. I bring this up both because it reflects how the tool’s aesthetics are often misunderstood and because it represents the pervasive logic that links utility with notions of wholeness and containment. To perceive the poetry as interrupting the utilitarian aspect of T.I.T is to reinforce the understanding that the body of the tool must be uncompromised by any “invading” or rather pervading meanings. It is the kind of logic that conversely allows for the existence of a militarized border wall. And still the T.I.T. tool was conceptualized as a porous object wherein its function as a dis-locating device occurs precisely because of its geo-poetic disturbance.

There are 23 navigational ecopoems published online and each one dictates movement instructions that are present, fluid, and passing. For example, poem #5 reads, “You can survive without eating anything for three weeks in hot weather. But, the body’s need for hydration is a different matter entirely. Consume the fruit of prickly pear, saguaro, organ pipe, yucca, or cholla for their moisture alone. In the summertime, pitahaya dulce, the fruit of the organ pipe cactus, ripens to red and drops its spines. The prickly pear cactus’ tuna reddens to purple, but never loses its needles. Dethorned, dethroned, both are delectably edible. Peel their skins” (*Poems*). The shift from a “you” who can survive to the somatic experience of “the body” in need of hydration connects the body’s will to survive as part of the conscious “you” who wills itself to survival in the hopes of a better or different life in El Norte. The materiality of the body is thus brought to the forefront of a project that, according to Dominguez, challenges the “‘slow violence’ of the neo-liberal dismantling of bio-citizenship” (Nadir). While the alliterative force of “prickly pear cactus’ tuna reddens to purple...” ensures that the situational instructions on

differentiating between “pitahaya dulce” and “prickly pear cacti” become memorable and readily accessible. Conclusively, the play on “Dethorned, dethroned” maps a different rhyme pattern marking the accessibility of both the spineless fruit and its regal colored counterpart.

In thinking about decolonial practices of relationality instead of decolonial projects, I have tried to capture the movement and fluidity of cultural workers that attempt to rescue, resuscitate, or re-present the obscured and lost migrant. Through terms like border thinking and “uprootedness” or “the Rhizome”, moreover, I have sought to expand on theoretical ideas that understand resistance as an ideology emanating from alternative ways of thinking. For *El Pocho-Che*, it was about confronting nationalist driven discourses in order to conceptualize a third world consciousness, while, for the EDT, it is about staging a digital recombinant theatre where multiple trans-bodies arrive, disrupt, and disengage from the rigid boundaries of language and power. In doing so, they have also failed in different and spectacular ways, representing failure as an important. Moreover, in their attention to loss and failure, they have provided us with a chance to move away from the temporal structure of nation making and rudimentary nationalisms. They demonstrate that in order to think about possible decolonized futures, we must, like Mignolo claims, de-link from dominant ways of belonging and being, and imagine alternative ways of relating or rather bridging ourselves to others.

## CONCLUSION

**State(s) of Silence: Reading Failure in Latino/a Literature and Cultural Production as Intervention**

*“forgetting becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription”*  
 - J.J. Halberstam

El Solecito Collective from Veracruz, Mexico is a group of more than 50 members, mostly women and mothers, searching for clandestine graves in Colinas de Santa Fe. The grassroots collective is a response to the lack of state action against the widespread disappearance of local people. With nothing more than basic gardening tools: shovels, machetes, hammers, and rods, El Solecito disperses across the fields of Colinas de Santa Fe in search of human remains. In fact, eight weeks before a September 2016 LA Times article on the collective's work, more than 80 mass graves had been found in the northern region of Veracruz. Although the group is only interested in finding traces of their missing loved ones, their labor exposes the pervasive culture of “authorized violence” that sanctions forced disappearances. Authority figures tasked with the job to search for the disappeared deny allegations that clandestine graves exist. According to one of the collective's volunteers, “[W]e are finding things that authorities never wanted to look for,... ‘We are doing their work, because we want to find our children.’” (McDonnell). The fluid coalition of people that form the collective range from dentists to teachers to auto mechanics indicates that people affected by criminal violence come from different class statuses, but I turn to their grassroots work precisely because their coalitional work engages with alternative forms of knowing that are comparative and relational.

The L.A. Times article on El Solecito introduces Guadalupe Contreras as on-site volunteer with the most search experience. A father looking for his son who disappeared in 2012, “Contreras joined the search movement and became expert at using a metal rod to probe the earth for possible remains. He focuses on subtle clues: signs of digging, trash, discarded clothing. He has been credited with finding dozens of graves in Guerrero” (McDonnell). Unlike the continuities between different regimes of power, like the state and drug cartels, that discipline bodies or overlook their disappearances, Contreras presence and expertise communicates a different understanding of loss. If the concealment of bodies in clandestine graves depersonalizes relationships, silencing families in the service of terror, then probing the earth with metal rods engenders forms of attachment that are deeply personal, affective, and sensorial. The metal rod is a tool that is hammered six feet into the ground, pulled up, and smelled to indicate whether or not what lies under the ground is dirt or a decomposing body. Searching for the disappeared with a metal rod extends the search beyond the visual by evoking smell and a tactile understanding of “subtle clues.”<sup>91</sup> Gayatri Gopinath claims that “sensorial memory- smell, texture, touch, sound, heat - conjures forth those affective attachments that store, individual, familial, and collective histories, and that evade or are banished from the official archive” (184). Thus, for Contreras and the other volunteers that make up the collective, sensing the disappeared is a way of relating to others’ pain. They work collectively precisely because they experience a shared sense of loss. Using their senses to find the disappeared does not explain the violence that obscures the lost body, but it underscores the limits of institutions and state actors like police forensics teams who

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<sup>91</sup> As a complimentary example to the work El Solecito is doing, in the Chilean film, *Nostalgia por la Luz*, mothers searching for their disappeared loved ones in the Atacama desert use their hands to differentiate between the tactile feeling of bone and rock. The senses are employed here too even though they are separated by place and time.

purport to help and produce the truth. Much like the opening lines of the articles state, the volunteers understand “[W]e are all sharing in this together.”

I have outlined the limitations and dangers of official forms of representation in the search for the disappeared. In the acts of gathering and cataloguing the disappeared through archives and human rights reports, the body of knowledge available is often scrutinized by the very state responsible for disappearances. When foreign powers intervene in the name of social justice, their work replicates the colonial logic of management and classification that undermines groups of people deemed inferior. Thus, I argue for finding alternative ways of knowing and sensing the world that are relational, creating more egalitarian affinities between beings and places through the practice of failing. In other words, because the logic of coloniality produces different patterns of abuse, it gathers its force in rendering the Other (il)legible, replacing relationality with naturalized understandings of superiority and inferiority. So being illegible may be a form of resisting oppression since the classification of superior/inferior occurs precisely when one is legible to the state and its institutions. I advocate for failing to speak with the terms of colonial ideologies in order to imagine alternative ways of articulating. In effect, I am not asking marginalized communities to embrace the systematic failures and disadvantages that have rendered them Other, but rather to seek the forms of knowing that have been obscured by systems of power. Like the LA Times story above indicates, when thinking of methodologies for the search of the disappeared, sometimes the affective experience of smelling and touching may illustrate better ways of accounting for lost loved ones.

I examine the failed articulations of memories and histories in literary texts as well as the cultural production of activists as “practices” of recovery in order to disengage with project-centered notions of return. What the imaginative work of diasporic and transnational thinkers

does is to envision a set of processes that remain fluid, escaping the fixed rigidity of projects that inform the work of coloniality. For the sake of my project, I see the creative deployment of failure and recovery as terms that undermine the capitalist interests and logic of nation states. Attention to loss and failure provides a chance to move away from the temporal structure of nation making and rudimentary nationalisms. By engaging with interdisciplinary material in conversation with J.J. Halberstam's antidisciplinary scholarship, moreover, I participate in a tradition of literary studies and cultural production that embraces the political importance of reading different forms of narrating, and stresses the significance of recognizing the Americas as shared histories. I claim that an understanding of "American" history as shared is important because it shifts a Central American imaginary away from the margins and repositions it as an important area of study. In doing so, we may then begin to incorporate the grassroots work of people like the El Solecito collective as worthy of academic attention.

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